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METHODIST IDYLLS

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BY

HARRY LINDSAY

AUTHOR OF

'RHODA ROBERTS, A WELSH MINING STORY.

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TO MY WIFE

NOTE

In these stories the author has refrained from giving the dialect in its broadest form, so that the patience of his readers might not be tried overmuch, and, except in a few instances, words of only local significance have been scrupulously dropped.

There is another reason. What is true of almost every dialect in England is true of the Gloucestershire dialects, viz., that the *patois* of a certain area often bears no more resemblance to that in a neighbouring district than the Cockney twang does to the brogue of the Irishman. So far as it goes, however, what is here set down is correct.

H. L.

A10129 School of Theology at Claremont

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Aaron Priestly's Stewardship

AARON PRIESTLY'S STEWARDSHIP

He had been circuit steward for forty years. He was a lawyer and a wealthy man, and perhaps that had something to do with his long term of office. The nomination is vested solely with the superintendent minister, and naturally he loves to name men of means and of acumen to fill so distinguished a post. And no one will greatly blame him for so doing. Such men give a status and a dignity to the circuit, not only in the immediate neighbourhood, but, what is still more important, in the District Synods and at the Conference.

But forty years is a long time, and a man in office so long is apt to think himself indispensable. It is but human nature that he should do so. Others, too, begin to imagine that such a man has a monopoly of honour and responsibility, and the critics—not openly, of

course, but clandestinely — load him with opprobrium.

Aaron Priestly had seen a long procession of preachers come and go, but he never changed. Like Tennyson's brook it seemed as if he went on for ever. Nothing was more certain than his re-nomination at each December meeting, 'just for one more year,' until at length the Quarterly Meeting had come to accept the proposition as a matter of course, and would have been completely shocked and dazed had any other name been mentioned. Of course there were exceptions, as there are to all things, though there had been none to Aaron Priestly's forty years of office. A few ardent spirits longed for a change, and it was their fervent hope that each new superintendent minister would effect it. Some of the bolder amongst them even ventured to suggest the desirability of such a change to each newcomer. But, either for the reasons above stated, or that no minister had sufficient courage to break through such long-established custom, things continued the same year after year.

At each December Quarterly Meeting the superintendent would rise from his seat, and, in a graceful and complimentary speech, with

a neatly-worded tribute in it to the steward's long and excellent services, beg leave to mention a name which he ventured to think would be received with acclamation by all the brethren present, and then he would name Aaron Priestly. Then the show of hands would be taken, after which the steward would leisurely struggle to his feet, and, with the greatest suavity imaginable, graciously condescend to accept the office 'for one more year,' but always expressing the hope that some of the other brethren would see their way to allow themselves to be nominated for the high office next year, as it was about time, he would naively add, that there should be a change. Then the junior steward, in office a youth of only fifteen years' standing, would be renominated to serve with his senior, and he would in turn accept office with the same genial suavity, but with the expression of his annual joke that he did not consider himself a freeholder in the stewardship, like his honoured brother Aaron Priestly, but merely a leaseholder; and he, too, hoped that the meeting would see its way to put a new tenant in next year.

At length the Rev. Theophilus Todd was ap-

pointed superintendent minister of the circuit, and he took the steward at his word. 'The fact is,' he said to Aaron, 'I am quite of your opinion, and I think your decision a wise one.'

Aaron looked at him in amazement. He knew well what the minister meant, but he thought the minister ought to have well known that his annual statement at the Quarterly Meeting was only his courteous way of thanking the meeting for a renewal of its confidence in him. He was a little nettled that the superintendent should have shown himself so dense.

'I've heard a good deal of dissatisfaction expressed up and down the circuit, and I think it best to allay it.'

The Rev. Theophilus Todd had undoubtedly received a call to the ministry, but none to diplomacy.

'Dissatisfaction! Pray, at what?'

'Now, now, Mr Priestly, don't grow indignant! There's really no cause for it whatever, and, if you will only control yourself a little, I am sure that you will see that the policy I suggest is a wise one.'

'But of what do people complain? Of my ability? Oh! you needn't hold up your hands in that shocked manner. If there's dissatisfac-

tion, there are some grounds for it, I suppose. Do people say I am unfit for my position? You shake your head. Well, what do they say? Do they say I am not sufficiently zealous? No, again? Well, is it my faithfulness they impugn? Or my loyalty, or what is it?

'And pray, who are they who have expressed such dissatisfaction? They are surely late in the day originating the word. I have been steward for forty years, and, until now, I've never so much as heard a whisper of such a thing. If these unnamed grumblers have anything to say, why don't they say it to my face, instead of secretly stirring up strife? There's the Quarterly Meeting, let them attend it and say their say, if they are not cowards.'

Aaron's strong indignation had been growing while he had been speaking, so that by the time he had poured out his hot torrent of words he had come to consider himself a much-abused man. And that was just the feeling his face expressed as he stood glaring at the minister.

'These are democratic times,' said the minister, 'and that is the only explanation I can offer you for this wide-spread dissatisfaction. But you greatly wrong the friends throughout the circuit in thinking they undervalue your abilities or

zeal. Everywhere I hear you spoken of with becoming respect. It is not you, but your long continuance in office that occasions the dissatisfaction. It is generally thought that there should be a change.'

'Some one covets my office?' Aaron barked.

'No one that I am aware of. As I said before, this feeling is not confined to one person; it is widespread. A change is thought desirable in order that the honours and responsibilities of office may be shared, and in order that others may be able to take a deeper and a more intelligent interest in the circuit.'

Aaron fumed angrily. 'There is not another man in the circuit capable of sustaining the dignity of the stewardship!

'I maintain it,' he went on, with growing anger, as he noticed the minister's surprise. 'Nor is there one qualified. Look round upon the circuit. Is there a single man of education that you can point to?'

'There's Mr Sayce?'

'A pettifogging jerry-builder,' said Aaron, contemptuously.

'Well, Mr Robbins?'

'A miserable credit-giving grocer, who makes people pay through the nose.'

'How about Mr Lomas, then? He's a shrewd man. His business is a fairly good-sized one, too; and he seems to conduct it with success.'

'Isaiah Lomas! That hot-headed man! Why, he would smash the circuit to pieces in less than a twelvemonth. As for the others, they all belong to the working classes. Just think of sending a tinker, or a cobbler, or a collier, or a farm-labourer to the District Synod! He would be like a fish out of water. You don't think so? You think every member should have his chance? Do you really believe, Mr Superintendent, that such men would be capable of safeguarding the best interests of the circuit at such a meeting? Man, I am surprised at you! Besides, have you no respect for decorum?'

And so Aaron clung to office. Nothing the minister said could convince him of the wisdom of conforming to the wish of the times. He had ruled so long that he could not contemplate the thought of laying down his sceptre.

And, on the whole, Aaron had ruled wisely. Though he should not have been the man to say it, the truth was patent that no man in the circuit was capable of following him with anything like the dignity with which he had buttressed

and permeated his office. No other man was so good a Methodist. There were plenty as good Christian men, but a long term of official life had brought Aaron into intimate acquaintanceship with all the inner working of the Church of his fathers, and he loved it with an intelligent love. And what was just then more to the point, he had been a good friend to the circuit, much of which goodness was well known, but of which the greater part was hidden and unrevealed. He had never been the man to let his left hand know what his right did.

'And now they want to put you out of the stewardship!' exclaimed his wife in disgust, when she heard of it.'

'That's what they are plotting for,' Aaron answered, simply.

'And whom do they suggest in your place?'

'I don't know. Sayce, or Robbins, or Lomas, I suppose.'

'The ungrateful things! Why, these men know nothing of Methodism. And what sacrifices have these men ever made for Methodism, I should like to know?'

'Hush!' exclaimed Aaron cautiously, for, whatever of fight he had shown the superintendent, he was not the man to encourage rebellion

in others, and, least of all persons, in his wife. Besides, what the minister could not do, reflection was already doing for him. Gradually but surely the conviction was growing upon him that there was no alternative for him, as a Christian man and a gentleman, but to submit to the inevitable.

'Self-sacrifice, my dear,' was all he said 'demands opportunity, and, if there be those in the circuit who are burning for the chance of showing it, I shall not be the man to stand in their way.'

It wanted a full month yet to quarter-day, but next morning Aaron shut himself up in his private office, and remained closeted there for hours poring over the circuit finance ledger. It had been a standing complaint for years that this book was never produced at the meetings and laid upon the table for inspection. And, in truth, there were some entries in that book which were the cause of Aaron's secrecy, and which he would not have had seen for worlds. Not even his junior steward knew of those entries, nor yet his wife, and they were known to Aaron and God alone. The problem he had to solve that morning was how to get rid of

those entries, a problem, however, which he failed to solve.

Yet no one doubted Aaron's probity, or even hinted at such a thing. But it was more business-like, people said, that things should be done openly. Besides, and a greater number of people echoed this complaint, it was fatal to the best interests of the circuit to keep the members of the Quarterly Meeting in ignorance of its financial transactions.

'Personally, Ahm content wi' things as 'em be,' said old Simeon Tandy, the Woodleigh local preacher. 'Ah've been goin' oop an' down this circuit nigh on forty years now, an' Ah've not yet seen th' man fit to stan' in Aaron Priestly's shoes.'

Simeon had been preaching that morning at the Spaton 'Cathedral,' as the local brethren facetiously dubbed the circuit-town chapel, and this conversation took place at Mr Sayce's dinner-table.

'That's not the question, Simeon,' said the jerry-builder. 'No one raises the question of Aaron Priestly's fitness for the office he has so long filled, though, as a matter of fact, any man would be fit if he had forty years of experience

at his back. The point to look at is the desirability of a change.'

'Ah see none,' replied Simeon somewhat abruptly, and plied his knife and fork. 'What Ah do see be that some foaks be ower covetous for office.'

'Really, Mr Tandy, you are in an uncharitable mood this morning.'

'If Ah be it be th' ingratitude o' th' circuit that makes me so,' retorted Simeon. 'Ah cannot 'bide this clamour for change. Why should foak wish it? Aaron Priestly wus good 'nough for their fathers, and he be good 'nough for 'em. Ah'll never hold oop m'han' at Quarterly Mittin' for another steward so long as Aaron lives.

'Desirable? Ah can't see that. Aaron be a man respected right throughout th' Connexion, an' what Ah see desirable be that it be well to have a well-known man as steward. Look at th' influence Aaron has! Why, there hasn't been a President of the Conference for forty years that Aaron has not entertained at "The Laurels," an' more than once Aaron's been an Exeter Hall chairman.

'Ah'll never credit that th' super contemplates

any such change as foak says he does till Ah sees it.'

At length the great day of the Quarterly Meeting arrived, and no one who was present ever remembered seeing so large a gathering before. Every place in the circuit was not only represented, but it really seemed as if all of every place who had any right to be present had availed themselves of the opportunity. So unexpectedly large was the gathering that it afterwards taxed all the ingenuity of the ladies to tea those present.

The superintendent had already announced the opening hymn when the stewards came out of the vestry and took their places at the table. Aaron wore a white flower in his buttonhole, set off with a spray of maidenhair fern. The oldest member of that meeting had never known Aaron to sit at that quarterly board without a flower in his coat. But on this occasion it was remarked that his bouquet was an especially neat and pretty one.

'If it be the inevitable,' he had said to his junior that morning in his greenhouse, as his gardener cut the flower for him, 'I will meet it with a good grace, and with the blameless purity of this white flower.'

During the singing of the hymn, Aaron looked round upon the brethren. An 'old hand' at those meetings, he was quick to realise the meaning of the unusual number present, and a faint smile flitted across his face. The subdued but palpable excitement of the brethren, too, did not escape him, and a lump rose in his throat as he thought of the reason of it.

'And are we yet alive' was the hymn sung, and, when it was finished, the superintendent called upon Aaron to pray. It was a most unusual thing for the minister to ask the steward to pray, for it was generally one of the local brethren who was called upon, but there were those present who secretly commended the minister for so doing. It was catching the steward with guile. But the solemn sequel was not anticipated. Aaron's heart was almost too full for words, and for a space the brethren knelt in silence, no sound escaping him the while. A painful hush fell upon the assembly, and, when a few more moments of deep silence ensued, more than one of those present opened their eyes and glanced up at Aaron.

He was standing with both hands bearing heavily down upon the table in front of him, his usually ruddy-looking countenance blanched

and the nerves of his face twitching with strong emotion. Several times he essayed to speak and failed. Every man in the meeting guessed the truth, and a thrill of sympathy passed from heart to heart.

A moment longer and Aaron found utterance. 'Our Father which art in heaven . . . . '

That was the prayer. Not another word. His usual stateliness of style was forgotten. He just harked back to the prayer his mother taught him by her knee, and which he had offered at least twice a day ever since that time, but never with such deep feeling as now; the prayer which our Lord taught to His disciples nearly nineteen hundred years before, and which to this day remains the grandest and sublimest prayer that human lips can utter; a prayer which, when all else fails, a man in sore need can fall back upon with confidence.

'That prayer,' said Simeon afterwards to his friend John Oakey, the Woodleigh farmer, 'gave a tone t' th' whole mittin', an' altered its character.'

Then came the usual financial statement, which proved another surprise. As the senior steward, it had always been Aaron's practice to make this statement himself, but on this

occasion the junior steward read out Aaron's figures to the meeting.

When he had finished he paused impressively, and looked round upon the brethren. Plainly he, too, was labouring under strong excitement, and all his attempts to hide it were futile.

'This,' he said presently, with a choking voice, and holding up a large book, 'is the circuit finance ledger. Rumours of dissatisfaction have reached us that it has not been produced at this table for audit.' He paused again, and the brethren could see the moisture from his eyes dim his spectacles. 'I say nothing now,' he went on again slowly, 'of the cruel reflection of such rumours upon our characters as stewards, especially upon that of my dear friend and brother here. My eyes have been opened during the last few days, and if I knew less I should say more.' Again he paused impressively, and the awe, originated by Aaron's prayer, deepened. 'It is now my duty to move that this book be audited, and I beg to name yourself, Mr Superintendent, and Mr Sayce.'

The jerry-builder was on his feet in an instant. 'I beg, sir, to decline. If that book must be audited, let some one else do it. But is it necessary, sir? After what we have heard from

the junior steward is there a single man in this meeting who would care to undertake the audit?'

During this brief and somewhat peppery speech a whispered consultation was taking place at the table. Those sitting nearest could hear the junior steward telling the chairman that he insisted upon an audit; and Aaron, in answer to a query from the superintendent, was heard to observe indifferently that he was in the hands of his colleague.

'Very well,' whispered the chairman, 'two shall be appointed.'

'And the audit must take place at once,' urged the junior steward.

The superintendent looked both confused and surprised, but he rose to his feet and announced that it was the stewards' strong wish that the audit should at once take place.

'If Brother Sayce will not agree, perhaps Brothers Robbins and Lomas will undertake it? As a favour to the stewards,' he went on persuasively, as the two named were observed to shake their heads vigorously in dissent.

'And yourself, Mr Chairman,' persisted the junior steward.

After a little more skirmishing and hesitation the brethren mentioned agreed, and it was

arranged that the audit should take place during the tea-time. Then the meeting settled down to its usual routine of business.

'But there was no audit after all,' explained Simeon Tandy to John Oakey that same evening in the farmer's byre. 'Just one glance at th' book was 'nough for 'em. Page after page, back for forty year, showed a growin' debt 'pon circuit, amountin' to hundreds of pounds, how many em' didn't stop to count. But it wus all written off, an' th' words *Cancelled for Christ's sake* was to be seen in red ink on ev'ry page.'

'What did Maister Sayce say? Dunno. He did not come into th' mittin' after tea. He told some o' th' brethren that he had an engagement at Spaton which prevented him stayin' to th' close. But Ahm thinkin' that he wus 'shamed to show his face in th' mittin' again.'

'So, therefore, Aaron Priestly be steward again?'

'Just for one more year.'

Do
Unto
Others

DO UNTO OTHERS

AARON'S heart was a large one and tender. No man in the circuit was more sympathetic than he, or so generous to a fault. He was a great contrast to his junior partner, and it was commonly understood that all the severity which the firm of Messrs Priestly & Co. had, from time to time, to mete out to certain opponents of its clients, emanated almost entirely from the Co. That young upstart was a man of law; Aaron was a man of compassion and mercy.

There was no denying the Co.'s cleverness. He had done well in his examinations, and since Aaron had taken him into partnership he had done much to keep the firm abreast with the times, and to place it in the forefront of all competitors in the district. All the big law cases were placed in its hands, and its offices were constantly crowded with clients. Some-

how it came to be understood that people might rely upon the smartness of the Co. and the moderation of Aaron Priestly.

The Co. was all for law. His manner bristled with the law. His speech was full of it. All his attitudes, movements, and even his looks bespoke the man of legal mind. His eye was keen to detect the slightest flaw or inaccuracy in an opponent's case, and he was swift to scent the budding of a fault in another's life. Naturally he was not a suspicious man, but he was so saturated with his professional importance that, directly he had earned the right to practise, he seemed to lay himself out to suspect everybody.

'Never trust any man,' was his favourite thesis. 'At the bottom of the best there is a vein of roguery which only awaits discovery.'

The grievous thing about the Co. was that he was in repute in the Church. His knowledge of the law, his well-known generosity towards the various funds, and his great business capacities all singled him out as a man to be prominently put forward. He was generally spoken of as the one man who would be Aaron's successor in the stewardship, and there was no denying that, in the purely business part of that distinguished office, he would have shone as no other in the

circuit could have done, but he lacked the one element which is better than all others for successfully performing the multiform and delicate duties of that high position. He lacked sympathy, and, therefore, of mercy he knew nothing. A fault to him was an unpardonable blunder, and, a wrong a thing nothing could right. Of course he had often heard the preachers discourse of the righting of the world's wrong by the death of the Incarnate Son of God, but he only thought of that as a beautiful theory. Yet he believed it, too, in a way. No man could question his orthodoxy, but that the example of Eternal Love should be followed out by men in every relationship of life was something he did not understand. In his mind, stern and exacting justice was before all things. The people who swerved a hair's breadth from the paths of legal virtue to him were little less than hideous abortions of the human type, and should be treated as such. 'Manacle and confine them as madmen,' he would exclaim contemptuously.

The great contrast in his and Aaron's characters was marvellously brought out in the case of Ezekial Harrop. Ezekial was a man in middle life at the time, and was living in the

small house which stands at the cross-roads between Woodleigh and Spaton. He had been born in the house, and had lived in it all his days. The house stands in about a quarter of an acre of its own grounds, and Ezekial's family had grown garden produce in it for three generations. And, as all the Harrops had been honourable and true men, it naturally fell out that Ezekial, the latest of the family, was a man much respected, not only in the immediate neighbourhood, but right throughout the district. But throughout the Spaton circuit Ezekial was more than respected; he was beloved. His generous, kind and sympathetic nature won for him the love and goodwill of all, while it was unhesitatingly acknowledged there was no better class-leader than he from Spaton to Didbrok.

'Ezekial Harrop is a pillar in Israel,' Aaron explained to the new superintendent. 'Such men as he and Simeon Tandy are a credit to the circuit, and worth a bushel of some men. What the circuit would do without them I do not know. They are foremost in every good work, and their zeal and piety constantly witness for the power of the Gospel.'

'And yet neither are men of standing in the world?'

'Both are really poor men. Ezekial is a little better off in this world's goods than Simeon, but all told he does not earn much more than £70 per year. Forty pounds is his salary as relieving officer; he gets another twelve pounds for acting as clerk to the Woodleigh School Board, and the remainder he earns by selling his garden produce. How the poor fellow has managed to subsist I can't imagine. His income is little enough for one person to live on, but to maintain an invalid wife for fifteen years, and to rear a delicate daughter upon such slender means! Why, his doctor's bills must run away with nearly all his income. A fit case for charity? Ezekial Harrop is not the man to accept it. He has been tried more than once. "No, no," he has said, "I will maintain my own family as an honourable man," and, on the only occasion when he was persuaded against his will to accept a few pounds to help him out of a pressing difficulty, he insisted upon treating it as a loan, and repaid it with interest.'

A time came when Ezekial was driven to his wits' end. His daughter's health had long caused him anxiety and expense, but a month before she had grown alarmingly worse. The doctor feared that she was rapidly developing

her mother's spinal complaint, and shook his head gravely. 'Try what a change will do,' he said.

Ezekial's heart almost failed him. The expense involved in such an undertaking was beyond his means.

'And you might try a magnetic belt.'

'Will it do any good?'

'It may, and, as a last resource, is at least worth a trial.'

As a last resource! Had it come to that? The words were plainly an acknowledgment of the doctor's inability to cure, and they haunted Ezekial all that night and throughout all the next day. He loved his daughter as his own soul, and there was nothing that he was not willing to do for her so far as lay in his power, but this thing drove him to his wits' end. And yet if the doctor's recommendations were not carried out Alice might die. It was almost, nay, it *was* a certainty, for the doctor had stated so much.

That night Ezekial could not sleep. He got out of bed and went downstairs. On his way down he looked into his daughter's room. A night-light was burning on the table near the bed. Ezekial took it in his hand and held it

so that its feeble light might fall upon his child's face. She was just then sleeping soundly; but her wan face and her wasted hands lying out upon the counterpane, so much resembled that other wan face and transparent hands he had just left in his own bed that his heart sank within him. He set the light in its place again, and proceeded downstairs.

There were a few dying embers in the kitchen grate. He raked them together, and then sat down before the little fire thus made to brood over his trouble. What could he do for his lass? She was very, very ill, and slipping away from him like a shadow. He could not bear the thought of parting with her. She was all the world to him, and like the apple of his eye. Yet the die was cast. Her doom was fixed. Inexorable Fate already shook his quivering spear over her. The thought appalled him and filled him with an agony of despair.

Ha! a light broke in upon him. He started to his feet with the impulse of it, and stood a moment with conflicting thoughts, and a face depicting strangely-changing moods each moment of time. Relief alternated with horror, light with gloom, joy with dread. A little while he hesitated half in doubt. Then he stealthily

crossed the kitchen, and softly entered the little ante-room which served him both as parlour and office. He took his keys from his pocket and noiselessly opened the safe. Twenty sovereigns lay in the cash-box inside the safe. It was the amount he had received the night before from the guardians to pay the weekly dole of the poor of the parish. Three of the sovereigns would buy the much-needed magnetic belt, and five more would pay the expenses of a fortnight at the seaside for his daughter. The money was not his, but he would not steal it. He would simply borrow the amount, and delay a few of his payments week by week until he had by degrees refunded the whole. The cold sweat rose to his brows as he contemplated the bare thought of such a thing, and a shrinking of the heart and flesh came over him. But what *could* he do? Was ever man so driven by the force of cruel circumstance? If he could not put his scruples aside a little, the awful alternative was the death of his beloved daughter. That he could not contemplate for even one moment, and, like many another deluded mortal, he took the fatal step.

Nemesis follows hard after offence. It is what the Old Book says: 'Be sure your sin

will find you out.' Sometimes discovery and retribution tread upon the very heels of crime. Ezekial Harrop found it so to his cost. A casual remark, dropped by a widow in the hearing of Aaron Priestly's co-partner, proved like a spark to tinder. The very day on which the magnetic belt arrived from the firm in London, and before the arrangements for the seaside trip could be completed, the Co., who was clerk to the Board of Guardians, demanded explanations from Ezekial as to why Widow White's parish allowance had not been paid. Ezekial was not an adept at crime. He could not lie, and at once blurted out the painful truth.

'No circumstance in life,' severely said the Co., 'justifies a man violating his trust,' and he turned and went away in a rage. The next day Ezekial Harrop was arrested on a charge of embezzlement, and brought before the Spaton magistrates.

Aaron Priestly was in London at the time, and was amazed beyond measure when he heard of it.

'You have acted precipitately,' he said to his Co., and Aaron's florid face paled and twitched with excitement.

'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' replied the Co. with perfect nonchalance. 'One really can't be precipitate in these matters. Delay might mean flight.'

'But Ezekial Harrop is one of ourselves—'

The Co. raised his brows. 'Mr Priestly! Surely justice demands impartiality?'

'He is a member of our church,' Aaron went on with persistent severity, 'and that fact surely merited some consideration.'

'I can't see it,' said the Co. with a shrug of his shoulders.

'You can't see that there is a filial bond between members of the same church, and that we ought to treat each other as brethren? Then pray, what is the good of the church? Is it only a collection of individuals, selfish individuals, trying to make sure of a place in heaven? That is not my idea of it, sir. Why, worldlings have a better conception of their duty towards their fellows.

'Besides, was it well for you to expose the church to ridicule? What a sweet morsel you have provided for the profane! How they will gloat over it, and say, "There's your Christianity!"

'No, no; I am not straining justice. I have

no brief to bolster up crime. But there is crime and crime, and I judge offences differently. Yes, I know *your* doctrine. You need not state it again; but I hope I have sufficient humanity about me to give another chance to a man who has unfortunately fallen. I say it advisedly, and I take into consideration the pressure of Ezekial Harrop's circumstances.

'You are astounded? Of course you are. *You* cannot allow that there is any circumstance in life that justifies a man sinning. I am not attempting to justify Ezekial Harrop, but I will say this, you and I cannot tell what we might have done had we been placed in his position.

'How would I have acted? As Christ did. Do you think that a man like Ezekial has not suffered enough from his own conscience—'

'He had no conscience when he robbed Widow White,' angrily interpolated the Co.

'Don't tell me that. Ezekial Harrop has not been a hypocrite all these years, and I have faith in him yet.'

The Spaton magistrates committed Ezekial to the assizes, and in the trial which followed, he was sentenced to a month's imprisonment. At first the case had looked very black against the dejected prisoner, but Aaron Priestly had busied

himself on Ezekial's behalf, and had voluntarily undertaken his defence. The strangest of scenes was witnessed at the trial, that of well-known partners in an eminent firm instructing opposing counsel. In the end the junior partner won the case, but his success was almost equal to a defeat, for the sentence was not commensurate with the legal gravity of the offence. Aaron had collected such a vast amount of documentary evidence as to Ezekial's clear record in the past, that the judge felt constrained to view the offence mercifully.

A month afterwards, Simeon Tandy and Farmer Oakey were wending their way to a special leaders' meeting to be held that night in the vestry of the Woodleigh Chapel. It was an adjourned meeting for further consideration of an objection raised to Ezekial Harrop's name 'being continued' on the class-book.

'John Reeve's objection is not a personal one,' explained Farmer Oakey.

'John Reeve be but a young man,' observed Simeon simply.

'He says the church oughter be aboöve suspicion.'

'I doant know what ull come of it all,' replied

Simeon, 'but Ahm at one wi' circuit steward in this matter.'

'Aaron is to be present 'em tell me?'

'Him be, an' th' sooper.'

'Ahm at one wi' Aaron, too, an' Ah b'lieve he ull get th' better o' John Reeve an' his party. There be no sense or reason in 'em. When a man's down it be oor place to pick him oop.'

For a few moments the two men walked along in silence.

'Ahm thinkin',' said Simeon presently, 'there be a big surprise awaitin' some o' 'em.'

Farmer Oakey pricked up his ears.

''Ave yo' not heard onything?'

'Not a whisper.'

'What should yo' say if Aaron brought Ezekial along wi' him to th' meetin'?'

'Yo' doant mean it!'

'Ah do,' replied Simeon confidently. 'Aaron met Ezekial this morning at th' prison-gates, an' brought him home in his own carriage.'

It all fell out as Simeon had anticipated. Aaron did bring Ezekial to the meeting, and, though John Reeve's party had mustered in strong force, at the sight of poor Ezekial's pitiful face and changed appearance all opposition to his membership died down.

'I respect,' said Aaron, in the speech he made to the meeting, 'the opinions of those who cry out for a pure church; it is a healthy sign of the right and zealous feeling that is amongst us; but we must not forget that mercy suits poor sinners best. The Church of Christ is as broad as the world, and does not shut its doors against any who seek admittance, and who truly repent of their sins, even though they have been the vilest of the vile. And it is the duty of this church to receive back into its fold, with thankfulness and joy, our dear, afflicted brother, Ezekial Harrop. Who are we that we should be his judges? English law has already judged him and punished him, but there is not a man in the whole district who does not feel that our brother has suffered more than enough. And shall we show less sympathy than the world? Does not the just man fall seven times and yet riseth again? I call to your minds the words of our Saviour Christ, "As ye would that men should do unto you, do you even so unto others," and I beg to move that Ezekial's name be continued on the class-book.'

There was not a dry eye in the room when Aaron sat down. For a few moments dead silence reigned. Then the Superintendent,

whose heart was full, with trembling and broken voice put the resolution to the meeting. There was not one dissentient. John Reeve did a noble thing. Rising from his seat, he crossed the room and held out his hand to Ezekial. For a space the two men stood in silence, while all in the room were surcharged with deep emotion.

Presently the Superintendent broke the silence. 'Will our dear brother Ezekial Harrop pray?'

It would be almost sacrilege to tell of the agony and contrition of that prayer, but none who were present will ever forget it. To their dying day it will be a holy and sacred memory.

The Mellowing Of Jesse Stallard

THE MELLOWING OF JESSE STALLARD

I

AS THE SPARKS THAT FLY

AARON'S children had all died in infancy, and he grew to be an old man in a childless home. That may, or may not, have been the cause of the strong opinions he held upon the matter of child-training. Generally speaking, those who have never reared children of their own profess to know more about the subject than those who have. One thing, however, Aaron ought to be credited with, and that is the strong love he retained for the little ones right up to his old age. Of few childless men can this be said, but it is often true of them that the flight of time only deepens their peevishness and abhorrence.

'God has blessed me with everything else in life but living children,' he used to say, with a

deep-drawn sigh, 'and for the love of a little child, one all my own, I could willingly part with all else I possess.'

Aaron had repeated this remark one day to Jethro D. Hawley, the Woodleigh grocer and general merchant, scholar and poet, as the two, accompanied by good old Simeon Tandy, went home from a children's service held in the Woodleigh Chapel. Curiously enough, both Jethro and Simeon were childless men.

'Children are a great responsibility,' said Jethro.

'And a great blessing,' said Aaron.

'That all depends—'

'On their training,' Aaron supplied.

Jethro D. Hawley shook his head. Though he was a poet he was often of a gloomy and pessimistic mood.

'Partly,' he replied, slowly, 'and partly on inherited tendencies. For instance, it does not follow that a good man's child will turn out a blessing to him. Some malignity inherited from a great-grandsire which, though it has lain dormant for a generation, may be lurking in the child's blood ready to break out at the first opportunity.'

Aaron shrugged his shoulders sceptically.

'You are not a believer in that doctrine?' Jethro queried.

'I am a believer in the grace of God, and in its power to triumph over even inherited tendencies.'

'Yet you and I have known cases in which heredity has been stronger than grace.'

'You may speak for yourself as to the theories you have formed,' replied Aaron tartly, 'but not for me. I have never known any such cases.'

'But Lucy Stallard—is hers not a case in point?'

'How so?'

'You have surely heard the story about her great-grandfather? No? Brother Tandy here must have often heard it.' Simeon assented with a nod. 'Lucy's great-grandfather,' went on Jethro, 'was a notorious character—an incorrigible scoundrel, in fact, and given up to every form of wickedness. The story goes that he took a positive delight in deeds of devilry, and it is well known that he ended his days in a convict prison.'

'Jesse Stallard's grandfather?' queried Aaron, wonderingly.

'Yes,' replied Jethro, 'and my point is that

Lucy's present escapade is entirely due to an inherited malignity.'

'Nonsense,' warmly answered Aaron, 'poor Lucy's misfortune is but the natural outcome of Jesse's stupid training. She has gone to ruin, poor soul, through her father's inanity.'

Whatever part the hereditary principle may have played in Lucy's degradation, there was certainly some truth in Aaron's view of it. For a harder man than Jesse Stallard, class-leader and sometime society steward of the Woodleigh Chapel, never lived. Yet he was a good man in his way, and a man universally respected. As a member of the church no one was more consistent, orthodox, or zealous. He rarely missed a church meeting. He was what the Rev. Theophilus Todd loved to call 'a dependable brother;' every preaching service found him in his accustomed seat, while he prided himself on not having missed the weekly prayer meeting more than three times in twenty years. Besides all this, he was a model committee man, and served the Society with signal ability. His lynx eye let nothing pass it, and his shrewdness had over and over again saved the church from peril.

Now it might be naturally thought that such

a burning and a shining light in the church would just have been the man to rear a family well. But the reverse is the fact. At home he was gloomy and forbidding. He loved all his children, but he never suffered himself to show the least demonstration of it. His children shunned him and dreaded his home-coming. The moment he put his foot inside the door all laughter died in their hearts, and gloom prevailed. If it were evening, and the labours of the day over, they would instantly forsake what they were doing, and at once take their places in prim rotation round the table, while they made pretence of reading some serious work or other in which they did not feel the remotest interest. It was only when their father was at a committee-meeting, and they were sure that he would not be back for some hours to come, that the children could feel really comfortable at home and be free. As for amusements, such things were not permitted in Jesse Stallard's home. They were banned and forbidden as frivolities. A newspaper was not tolerated, and little else of other literature. The Bible, the hymn-book, Thomas à Kempis, and a few volumes of sermons, the leaves of which had gone yellow with age, and one or two badly-

printed, small, bulgy volumes of biographies of dead saints, were all the books the house afforded. Jesse's view was that for unregenerate, lost souls, nothing was 'worth a thought beneath, but how they might escape the death, the death that never dies.' He had three children, two sons and one charming daughter, Lucy, whose very face was a refreshing sight to look upon, so fair and sweet was it; but he thought only of them as 'damned' and 'lost,' because they had never been to the penitent form. There was only one way, in his opinion, for men to be saved, and that was in the good old-fashioned Methodist way; until the penitent had thus shown public contrition and made public confession, the good work, he contended, could not possibly take place. The meaning of the wind blowing where it listeth had never come home to him.

As will at once be suspected, such a gloomy presentation of religion only made Jesse's children loathe it, and it is scarcely surprising that as they grew up to maturity each of them in turn drifted from their father's church, and, what was more serious, from their father's God. Lucy was the first to go. From merest childhood she had been a lovable and loving girl, and,

despite her father's restraint, her free and cheerful disposition had found her a way into the hearts of almost every one in Woodleigh. There were few of the men of Woodleigh who would not have done anything or risked anything for Lucy. Every home was thrown open to her, and she was always a welcome visitor. Thus it was that Lucy grew up to her giddy 'teens, when, like scores of other ardent natures which have been long repressed, she began to realise how joyous a thing life is, and how great a contrast to her father's interpretation of it. The discovery was a delightful one to her, and made her pulses leap for very gladness. She flung herself into the stream of worldliness rampant in even so idyllic and restful a place as Woodliegh, and was soon caught in the concentric currents of its maelstrom.

At that time one of the chief frivolities of Woodleigh wast he weekly dance, held in Farmer Thompson's barn. The young fellows of the place, aided and abetted by the landlord of the Green Dragon, as well as by the farmer himself for the sake of his marriageable daughters, had arranged these dances, and, every Wednesday evening, a score of youths and maidens gathered in the dingy barn, which was but poorly lighted by two

swinging oil-lamps, to have a Cinderella or some other such dance. Lucy clandestinely joined them, and for a time all went well. She went and came for several weeks together without her father being a bit the wiser. But his suspicions were at length aroused.

'Yo've not been t' chapel th' night, Lucy,' he said to her one evening.

Wednesday was the preaching night for the Woodleigh Chapel, and Jesse's children were rarely absent from the services. It was his will and pleasure that they should attend, and any neglect of that duty, any repeated neglect of it, was sure to meet with his censure.

'No,' said Lucy, 'there has been so much to do at home to-day that Ah could not possibly leave it.'

'What ha' yo' had to do more than other days?'

Lucy glibly ran off a whole string of duties, but, though her father said nothing in reply, the excuse did not satisfy him. On the contrary, her words struck him like a blow. He did not then know it, certainly, but he felt they were untrue. Never before had he known Lucy to tell him an untruth, and never before had he had occasion so much as to suspect her; and

now more, far more, than the act of frivolity of which he feared she had been guilty, did the words cut him to the heart. There would have been two smarting hearts that night could Lucy only have seen her father in the secret of his closet as he agonised in prayer to God for her. But she knew nothing of it, and though, with guile, she attended the next week's preaching service, and the next, and the next, it was not long before she drifted back again to the dance in the barn.

Discovery soon took place. One night she came home later than usual, and much flushed and excited. Her hair and dress were both disordered. Jesse had been home from chapel nearly two hours before, and had sat watching the clock and awaiting her impatiently. He was bowed down with grief, but his ear was alert, and the sound of her light footstep outside sent him at once to the door.

For a moment he stood blocking the doorway and looking down upon her.

'Again absent fro' chapel, Lucy?' and there was an ominous tone in his voice which went to Lucy's heart.

But she answered promptly, 'Ah went for a long walk and forgot the time.'

He moved aside for her to pass, and they both went into the house and stood in the glare of the table lamp.

For a few moments they stood there in silence, she toying with her cape, and he eyeing her critically.

'Be it the long walk that ha' made yo'r face so red?' he asked presently, and with growing solemnity.

'Ah was late and Ah had to run to get home.'

'An' th' runnin'—were it that what ha' made all this 'ere dust on yo'r cloäthes?' he persisted, pointing from her dress down to her boots.

'Yes; the roads be awfully dusty.'

A flash of anger shot across Jesse's face, and at the sight of it Lucy trembled from head to foot.

'Th' roads dusty after so much rain as us ha' had laätely!'

Lucy began to cry, and buried her face in her hands.

'Yo've lied unto me, Lucy'—and she never remembered having heard his voice so solemn—'yo've lied unto me, an' not for th' first time . . Yo' ha' been to Farmer Thompson's barn wi' th' childer o' sin, a-dancin' yo'r soul into hell wi' harlots an' blackguards . . . an' now yo' dare

to stan' afore me, wi' God's eye lookin' down 'pon yo', an' wi'out so much as a blush tell me that wicked lie.'

There was nothing passionate in his utterance. He spoke with measured words and slow, deliberate, and painful emphasis. She was cowering at his feet now, sobbing piteously, but she was not one whit more agitated than he. And she knew it. She dared not look up into his face, but she instinctively felt that he, too, was strongly moved, and the catch in his breath as he stood towering over her convinced her of it.

Presently he spoke again. 'Get yo' t' bed. Ah'll talk wi' yo' to-morrer.'

He felt he dared not trust himself to say more. As a man of God, he would first pray over this fiery trial. He would seek spiritual direction. That very night the minister had been preaching about putting a bridle on the mouth to curb the tongue, and he had dwelt pointedly upon the folly of speaking in haste. Here was a fine opportunity for obedience to pulpit ministrations! So, when Lucy had crept softly and fearfully upstairs to bed, he sat down again in his chair before the fire to think and to pray.

He had not sat long before he was disturbed

by a smart rapping at the door, and, on opening it, in walked the Woodleigh mischief-maker, Mrs Reeves, and her faithful henchman, Sam'l Pryce. They advanced to the table in the centre of the room, and stood there with the light of the lamp falling upon their faces, just as Lucy and her father had stood half-an-hour before.

'Us ha' called to warn yo' o' summat, Jesse,' opened Mrs Reeves.

'Us ha' thought it oor duty,' explained Sam'l.

'In order to prevent scan'al,' Mrs Reeves amplified.

'Though as t' that, there be plenty o' foaks a'ready talkin' about it,' said Sam'l, with a weighty shaking of his head.

Jesse stood on the hearthrug with his back to the fire and his hands under his coat-tails, facing the busybodies. An inscrutable expression was on his face, which the two marked with concern and hesitation.

'P'raps Jesse d'know a'ready?' ventured Mrs Reeves after a pause, and looked from Jesse to Sam'l.

'P'raps he do,' said Sam'l, 'an' if so us ha' no call to tell un.'

'Though he oughter know what foak be sayin'.'

At this point Jesse interposed coldly: 'Just ha' th' goodness to tell me yo'r business, an' then begone. Ah've got to be oop betimes i' th' mornin', an' Ah want t' lock oop for th' night.'

'An' lock poor dear Lucy out?' cried Mrs Reeves, holding up her hands aghast.

'Her be a-dancin' in Farmer Thompson's barn,' explained Sam'l.

Jesse smiled feebly.

'Be that what yo' ha' coom to tell me? Well, neighbours, let me just say that yo' be sadly mistaken. Lucy be safe indoors and gone to bed some time sin'.'

'Safe indoors!'

'An' gone t' bed!'

The two gossips looked at each other in amazement.

'Have yo' anything more t' say?' cynically queried Jesse, surveying them.

'On'y,' replied Mrs Reeves, with slow consideration, 'that we can hardly credit it. Us ha' just coom fro' th' barn.'

'An' yo' saw Lucy there?' asked Jesse.

'That we did,' said Sam'l Pryce, with emphasis,

'an' it be more than we can un'erstan' for yo' t' say her be now gone t' bed.'

Yo' be sure yo' saw her?' and the two had no suspicion that Jesse was assuring himself of Lucy's guilt.

'Sure.'

'Could yo' not be mistaken?'

'Mistaken!' and the two laughed jeeringly.

'Well, neighbours, just for yo'r satisfaction,' said Jesse, 'Ah'll just call oop to her,' and he went to the foot of the stairs.

'Lucy!'

In a moment the door of the bedroom was opened, and Lucy's tremulous voice was heard in reply.

'Now, p'raps that 'ull satisfy yo'. Be her oopstairs or not?'

'Just ask her,' said Mrs Reeves, 'if her wasn't at barn to-night.'

Jesse turned upon them fiercely.

'Ah'll ask her nothing o' the kind,' he said, 'but Ah'll ask yo' two to walk out o' that door,' and, as he spoke, he flung it wide open and pointed to it imperiously. 'If her said no, yo' wouldn't b'lieve her.'

The moment they were gone Jesse locked and bolted the doors for the night. Then he turned

down the lamp. If other callers came they would see the house in darkness, and pass on.

'Thank God,' he muttered to himself, as he once again seated himself in his chair, 'that Ah was able to shut their mouths.'

He was trembling like a leaf now, and the cold perspiration had mounted to his brow. He took his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead.

'If those wolves had got hold o' any flaw in my poor lamb's character 'em would have torn it all to pieces. . . It be bad enough that she ha' lied unto me, and disgraced herself in that wretched barn, wi'out 'lowing 'em to add to her shame. . . How sweet a morsel it would 'ha been to 'em! . . . Lucy out t'a'most midnight an' her poor old father a-sittin' oop for her in sorrow! . . . How 'em would ha' rolled it under their tong' as a sweet morsel, an' afterwards ha' spread it far an' near. . . But Ah were one too many for 'em this time. . . No, no, my darlin', whatever faults there be in yo', Ah'm yo're father still, an' as such bound by ties o' nature to shield yo'. . . An', God helpin' me, Ah will, Ah will.'

His mood was entirely changed. While waiting his daughter's home-coming, he had sat nursing a fierce anger, but when she lay so

low at his feet, with black deceit on her fair soul, his one over-mastering thought had been of her lost state, and it had moved him to holy concern. But now that he knew there were those who would drag his child's fair name through the dirt, all his faculties were at work for her deliverance. After a time he got down upon his knees on the hearthrug, and laid the whole case before his God. He felt stronger afterwards.

'Ah'll speak tenderly to th' poor lamb in th' morning,' he said to himself, 'and show her the folly o' her ways,' and then he took his candle and went up to bed.

As he passed his daughter's bedroom door he paused a moment to listen. All was still within, and, after muttering a blessing, he passed on to his own room. But he had too long delayed the day of tenderness, for, under cover of the night, Lucy stole from the house and turned her back upon her father's home.

Jesse found the following letter next morning on the table in the kitchen. It was written in a trembling hand, and every line of it was blotted with tears.

'DEAR FATHER.—When you read this I will be gone from you for ever. Last night I told you a lie, and I can never look up to your face again without shame. I *was* at the dancing-class in Farmer Thompson's barn, and I have frequently been there before. I knew you disapproved of it, and therefore I went secretly. I saw no harm in the dance, and those who were present are not 'harlots' and 'blackguards.' They are just the sons and daughters of respectable villagers. You have been a good father to me, though you have never let me love you. I would have done so if you had let me. But I could not put up with your religion. It is too cold and cruel a thing for me. I don't think everybody are damned sinners just because they have not been to the penitent form, and, if God cannot make some allowances for poor people's frailties, why did He create us at all, or, at least, why didn't He make us differently? I am sure I should rather not have lived than be badgered in the way I have been ever since I came into the world. But I suppose it is all right. At any rate, it is just what I have always been taught; but still I cannot love such a God, and therefore I am going where you will know nothing about me, and need not worry yourself

about me any more. I kissed little Ephraim before I went; and please tell Dan not to grieve after me. Good-bye, and mother's God be with you all.—Your broken-hearted daughter,—'LUCY.'

Jesse read the letter with amazement. When he had finished he dropped into his chair and sat stunned and stupefied. This was, indeed, a fiery trial. Presently he began to realise the full meaning of it, and then conflicting feelings strove for mastery in his breast—remorse and anger, despair and pity. It was a terrible blow to him, and more especially just now, when he had made up his mind to change his conduct towards his child. And there was something in the wording of the letter which struck him as peculiar, something both of surprise and mystery. It had plainly been written with a bursting heart, and every tear-stained word testified to the agony with which they had been penned. He read the letter over again, this time less feverishly than before. It surprised him more and more. He had never dreamt that Lucy had thought so deeply of things, or felt so strongly. It was a revelation to him, and a reproach. The letter was the letter of a matured woman. He had never considered Lucy as

anything more than a child, and he had always treated her as such. Neither her mental nor physical development had ever entered into his calculations in her training, though he had looked for her to carry on all the household duties just as well as his dead wife had done. And now this was the result of it!

But what was this heresy she had written? He read that portion of the letter again, and it killed all his pity. It roused his anger afresh. Whatever else he could excuse, he could not excuse this. It was a libel on God, and he would not have his Maker libelled by the dearest soul living. Oh! the supreme wickedness of it! And to what lengths she must have gone to presume on it! She was no child of his to have done so. The blood rushed to his head and face as he thought of the shame of it. He crushed her letter in his hand and thrust it into his pocket.

'Such childer o' th' Devil,' he muttered, between clenched teeth, 'nothin' can be done for 'em. Best leave 'em t' fill oop th' measure o' their iniquity.'

That night, for the first time since she had been born, Jesse omitted Lucy's name from his evening prayer.

II

THE HUMBLING OF A MAN

A MORE inscrutable face than Jesse Stallard's could scarce have been found anywhere. Unlike the majority of human beings, his face was never any index to his mind, and no one who looked upon it could tell from it alone what was passing in his heart. It was a sphinx-like face, cold and passionless. In this respect Jesse was a great contrast to the rest of the Woodleigh congregation, whose loud 'Amens' and rapturous faces gave even the poorest preacher good encouragement. The most eloquent sermon made no visible effect upon Jesse, and he had been known to listen to the most melting story without so much as a twitch of his facial muscles. Woodleigh folk always thought of him as a man without one drop of the milk of human kindness in his breast, as of a man without feeling, and of a cold and an unsympathetic nature.

Such a man, as may be naturally supposed,

was not likely to carry his heart upon his sleeve, or to willingly let the world see the skeleton in his cupboard. So several days passed away before Woodleigh knew anything of Lucy Stallard's flight. And even then it knew nothing positively, and only arrived at certain conclusions from certain vague, supposititious data. But Jesse gave no sign and said nothing. Just as if nothing had happened he went as usual about his accustomed labours, attended the services in his beloved chapel as before, and altogether carried himself much the same as he had done for forty years.

On the morning of Lucy's flight little Ephraim had at once asked for his sister. He was barely five years of age, but he was old enough to have long noticed the strained relations which existed between his father and sister. Besides, in her moments of resentment and indignation, Lucy had often spoken to the child of their father as a hard and cruel man, and these burning confidences had given the little chap a certain bias against his father.

'Where is Lucy?' he asked, plaintively.

'Gone away,' Jesse answered, abruptly.

'Gone for long?'

'Dunno. P'raps for ever.'

The child looked up into his father's face in awe, and the look irritated Jesse beyond endurance.

'Ask me no more questions,' he said, hotly, 'an' doant yo' ever mention her name to me any more. Her be a bad, wicked hussy.'

Ephraim's little face flushed with sudden anger. 'Her be not a bad, wicked hussy,' he exclaimed, passionately, and then burst into tears, and do what he would Jesse could not pacify the child.

'I want Lucy, I want Lucy!' he cried in grief, and all day long, while at work in his fields, that pitiful cry rang through Jesse's soul.

When evening came a still greater trial awaited him. It had been Lucy's work to undress Ephraim and put him into bed at night. Now it perforce fell upon Jesse himself. It was a strange work for him that night, and a heart-breaking one. But when he carried the little man in his nightdress upstairs to bed, the feeling of isolation which stole over him well-nigh killed him.

In the bedroom he knelt down by his child's side at the bed to hear him lisp his evening prayers, just as Lucy had been accustomed to do ever since their mother died. The Lord's

Prayer and 'Gentle Jesus' were successfully gone through together, and then came the prayer for the separate members of the family.

'God bless father.'

'God bless father.'

Little Ephraim had never known what it was to pray for mother. She was dead long before he had learned to pray.

'An' Dan.'

'An' Dan.'

'Protect an' keep him from all evil.'

'Protect an' keep him from all evil.'

'An' Uncle John.'

'An'—Yo' ha'nt said God bless Lucy!'

The words were as cold steel to Jesse's heart. He quivered from head to foot, and a chill struck through his blood. For a few moments he could not speak; the lump in his throat almost choked him, while, in spite of his reputed hardness, a thick mist gathered in his eyes.

'Yo' ha'nt said God bless Lucy, father!' repeated little Ephraim.

'Yo' say it yo'rsel',' Jesse stammered at length.

'I must say it after you,' persisted the child, for all his petitions were usually repeated one by one after Lucy.

Jesse's heart was bursting.

'Ah can't say it th' night,' he said, with a rallying as of severity in his tone.

'Why not th' night, father?'

There was a long and a deep pause before Jesse answered.

'Lucy be a bad girl,' he lamely replied presently, 'an' God doant love her.'

'Doant God love everybody?'

'On'y those what obey Him,' and Jesse bit his words off sharply.

'Muster Todd said that God loved all the world.'

'So Him does, so Him does,' answered Jesse, distractedly, and seeking to silence the child's guileless prattle.

'Then I am sure He loves oor Lucy,' emphatically rejoined the little man; 'and I am going to say, "God bless Lucy."'

Jesse could stand it no longer. He lifted the child up in his arms and put him into bed. But an hour afterwards, when Jesse stole into the room in his stockinged feet to see if little Ephraim were sleeping, he heard him murmuring pitifully over and over again, 'God bless Lucy; keep her this night from all evil, and bring her safe home again to me.'

The first public suggestion of Lucy's flight

came from Mrs Reeves about two days after the sad event. Mrs Reeves had called upon the Thornburys.

'It be the strangest thing possible,' said Mrs Reeves, referring to Lucy's non-appearance amongst them during the past two days. 'Her wur at dance in th' barn two nights ago, for Ah seed her myself through a chink i' th' door, an' so did Sam'l Pryce. Sin' then no one in Woodleigh ha' clapped eyes 'pon her.'

'Well, what of that?' asked Janet Thornbury coldly.

'What o' that?' snapped Mrs Reeves, with resentment.

'What does that prove?'

Mrs Reeves shook her head darkly.

'Yo' can put two an' two t'gether, Janet Thornbury, just as well as Ah can, Ah do not doubt.'

'But I can't make them five,' and at this smart reference to her well-known genius for exaggeration the gossip winced visibly.

'Well, Lucy be gone, at any rate,' she said petulantly, and with this parting shot took her departure, leaving the blacksmith's sister to think with grief over what she had heard.

With others Mrs Reeves got more sympathy.

As in most communities, so in Woodleigh, there were those who were ever ready to listen to any bit of scandal, and who were accustomed to dish it up spicily again for the benefit of the next they met. So by the time the gossip had reached Simeon Tandy's ears it had grown to alarming proportions. Simeon at once waited upon Jesse and laid the whole matter before him.

'As a man o' God,' he said to Jesse, 'Ah'm bound to tell yo' what foaks be sayin' about yo'.'

Jesse heard him in frigid silence.

'It may not be true,' Simeon went on, 'Ah'm hopin' it baint; but foak be sayin' as how yo' ha' driven pore Lucy out o' house an' whoam.

Jesse's eyes flashed angrily. 'Then foaks be tellin' o' lies,' he said bitterly.

'Just as Ah thought,' Simeon replied, his face brightening. 'Ah said at wunce as Ah did'n b'lieve ot. Ah could'n b'lieve such o' a brother.'

'Ah'm obliged to yo', Simeon,' Jesse said courteously, but offered no word of explanation as to Lucy's flight. When Simeon was gone, however, all Jesse's reserve broke down completely, and he groaned in spirit. 'God

A mighty ha' mercy,' he groaned, 'an' doant crush my heart alt'gether. My burden be even now a'most too heavy to bear, wi'out havin' to carry a load o' ill-will an' lies told o' me.'

At length the mystery was cleared up, and all doubts about Lucy's whereabouts were set at rest by a letter she sent to Janet Thornbury. The letter was undated and gave no address, but it bore the Liverpool postmark. Lucy had tramped on foot to that great mercantile city with the vague idea of getting to America by one of the many steamships that sail from that port, and she now wrote home to ask Janet, well known and beloved by every one for her goodness, to show kindness to little Ephraim.

'If you, dear Janet,' the letter ran, 'could only find it in your heärt to look in upon them occasionally and see a bit to matters, I would take it from you as a great kindness. If it be not asking you too much, you might hear him say his prayers at night, and tell him sometimes of his mother and me. You will find his Sunday clothes in the black box in my room, and, oh dear! whatever will he do without me, when he ought to be washed all over in the big tub every Saturday night? I wish I had him here with me. . . .'

Janet read the letter in tears, and then, as she was wont to do in all matters of importance, carried it to her old friend Thomas Tarling.

'This,' said the poultry farmer when he had read the letter, 'must at wunce be shown to Jesse.'

'After service this evening?'

'At wunce—wi'out a moment's delay.'

Janet glanced at him in wonder.

'Yo' see, Janet, my b'lief be that hers gone off in a bit o' a pet at summat or t'other, and this letter be on'y a feeler to get whoam again.'

'And I am sure,' said Janet, 'that Jesse would be only too glad to get her back again.'

'No doubt, no doubt; but her doesn't know that. Now, if us shows Jesse this letter it may make matters easy for th' boäth o' 'em. Jesse be a hard man, Janet, but he ull give in when he reads this letter, and he ull say, "Yo' be so good, Janet, as to write an' say as her 'as her father's forgiveness." It ull be like bringin' th' lost lamb whoam again, Janet.'

They found Jesse in the five-acres ploughing.

'Jesse,' said Thomas, without any circumlocution, 'Janet ha' received this letter this morn. Will yo' read ot?'

Thomas Tarling did not even tell Jesse whom

the letter was from, but (what father would not?) he divined it immediately. His hand trembled as he took the letter and glanced over its contents. But his immobile face gave no indication of the strong feeling surging within his breast. Twice he read the letter through slowly, noting every word and phrase, amidst a dead silence, while the two friends stood watching him with close attention and anxious interest. But he made no comment. When he had finished reading the letter he carefully refolded it, replaced it in its envelope, and handed it back to Janet.

'Thank yo',' was all he said.

'You will allow me, Jesse, to do what Lucy requests?' asked Janet.

'There be no call, Janet; thank yo' all th' same. Ah've a'ready learned to manage nicely.'

His manner chilled and repelled them. They had come to plead for Lucy and to offer him their sympathy, but they could find no words. Besides, Jesse, who was so brief upon the all-absorbing subject, would persist in talking of everything and anything that had no bearing upon it. He intended putting a few 'turmit' seed in the land he was ploughing, as 'em paid as well as anything. And he just remembered that he had a score of fowls that he had thought

of seeing Thomas about; they were good table birds, and Thomas could have them at the same price that he had had the last lot. . . Did Janet know whether her brother, Ned, had fastened the chain on the harness he, Jesse, had left at the smithy? . . And there was a trustees' meeting to be held in the vestry after that evening's service; would Thomas be able to put in an appearance?

At length Thomas Tarling forced himself to speak upon the subject uppermost in his mind.

'This be a sore trial that be coom 'pon yo', Jesse,' he said.

'A fiery trial,' answered Jesse, with great feeling, and the two kindly conspirators felt that the ice was at last broken.

'Simeon be everywhere contradictin' th' rumour that yo' drove th' pore bairn from house an' whoam.'

'Simeon Tandy be a man o' God, an' a faithful brother,' said Jesse sententiously; 'God ull reward him.'

'And when Lucy comes home that will silence everybody,' said Janet.

Jesse eyed her coldly.

'Lucy be not coomin' whoam again,' he said.

'Not!' and Thomas Tarling echoed Janet's surprise.

'What put that into yo'r heads? Her ull never darken my door again. Ah've Ephraim t' think o' now, an' God helpin' me, Ah'll keep him unspotted from the worl'. Her ud on'y contaminate un. Besides, why should her coom whoam? Her went away o' her own free-will. Hers made her bed, an' her must now lie in't. An' d' yo' know, neighbours,' and Jesse dropped his voice to an awful whisper, 'that her be a godless, thriftless loon, an' a child o' Satan?'

'An' d' yo' know that her be your dead wife's bairn?' said Thomas Tarling.

'An' your only daughter, Jesse?' pleaded Janet.

'It be true that her bears my name.'

'She is your own flesh and blood,' said Janet, indignantly.

'But her ha' sold hersel' to th' Devil.'

'Jesse Stallard!' and Janet glanced at him reproachfully.

'Yo' doant know all, Janet Thornbury,' and he began to fumble in his trousers' pocket. 'Her be a liar, a worl'lin', a blasphemer, an' a infidel. . . . Just yo' read that, Janet,' and Jesse placed Lucy's crumpled and blotted letter into

her hands, 'Best read ot out loud, so that Thomas may hear ot as well.'

Janet did so with flushed face and palpitating heart.

'Yo see,' said Jesse cynically, when she had finished, 'her be all Ah told yo', an' more. That letter be th' letter o' one past redemption.'

'No,' said Thomas Tarling brusquely, 'an' how can yo' as a Methodist class-leader say it? The foulest sinner under heaven be not past that else, Jesse, where ud yo' an' me be?'

'Her ha' despised her day o' grace.'

'So of'en and of'en ha' yo' an' me.'

'Her ha' trampled under foot th' blood o' the covenant.'

'An' us ha' done it times out o' number.'

'Her even denies an A'mighty being!'

'Her ha' only penned what yo' an' me ha' of en thought in oor hearts.'

'Her ha' consorted wi' harlots an' blackguards.'

'Our dear Saviour, Jesse, wus th' Frien' o' publicans an' sinners.'

'But He condemned their sins, an' wur on'y their Frien' to win 'em from th' error o' their ways.'

'An' can yo' be less t'win yo'r own flesh an' blood for Him? Baint blood thicker'n water?'

Look at her oopbringin'! . . .'

'A motherless bairn,' interjected Janet, with tears in her eyes.

'Eddicated in a Methodist Sabbath-scheul, rared in Methodist doctrine, wi' the way o' salvation plainly preached in ev'ry sermon! As us sometimes says, wi' so simple a Gospel, th' lowest hell will be reserved for Methodists who reject it. No, no, doant mention her to me at all; let un fill oop th' measure o' her iniquity.'

'An awfu' sayin',' Jesse, said Thomas Tarling, 'which may th' good Lor' never say o' yo' an' me!'

'But,' Jesse,' still pleaded Janet, 'this letter is not the letter of a really wicked girl.'

'Of as wicked a hussy,' he replied, almost fiercely, 'as could be found in a day's march.'

The probing of his wound was maddening him.

'Then it doant speak much for yo're training, Jesse Stallard,' said Thomas Tarling severely; 'an' yo' baint wi'out blame.'

That night there was a disappointment at chapel. The preacher planned did not put in an appearance, and Brother Simeon Tandy was obliged to take the service.

'Well, frien's,' he said in the vestry, 'Ah'm clean used up, but if Ah must preach Ah'll just ha' to change th' saddle o' an old horse.'

'There be some o' yo'r ol' horses, Brother

Simeon,' said Thomas Tarling, 'that Woodleigh ud on'y be too glad to see yo' ride again, specially such ones as "Mercy an' Truth ha' met t'gether," or "Behol', Ah stan' at th' door an' knock," or, aye, Simeon, give us that o'er again about the Good Shepherd.'

John Oakey joined Thomas Tarling in his request. 'Ah'll never forget that discoörse about th' Good Shepherd as long as Ah do live,' he said impressively, 'an' Ah m sure it be worth repeatin' a score o' times over. Ah for one ud never grow tired o' lis'enin' t' it.'

'Wur it at Didbrok, Simeon, yo' preached it when poacher wur brought in?' asked Thomas Tarling.

Simeon nodded his head in acquiescence.

'Ah do mind the circumstance oncommon well. Poacher had just coom out o' jail after eighteen months for poachin' on Squire Woodleigh's 'state, an' had gone straight back to his ol' game. He had a couple o' rabbits oop under his coat at time, had'n him?'

Simeon assented.

'Yes,' he said; 'he wur on his way whoam wi' his catch, an' just turned into Didbrok Chapel for sport when the power o' God fell

pon him. Ah never mind seeing such a conversion before.'

'What ha' become o' un now?'

'He be engaged in th' work oop in Lunnon in some o' th' missions. . . . But where's steward? Baint it time Ah wur in th' pulpit?'

Jesse had never been known to be late before. He had always made it a point of discipline to be in the vestry a quarter of an hour before the beginning of each service, in order to get the announcements ready, and to see the preacher into the pulpit. But that night the first hymn was over before he arrived. As he took his accustomed seat, more than one of those present noticed that Jesse's face was particularly set and hard-looking. Only one man, however, guessed the truth, and that man was Thomas Tarling.

'Our conversation o' this morn be a'ready bearin' fruit,' he mentally observed.

Simeon was at his best that night, but there were those in the audience who quickly realised that he had inverted the order spoken of in the vestry. Instead of changing the saddle he had changed the horse, and had kept the old saddle. The text was a familiar one with him, but the sermon was entirely new—an impromptu sermon, in fact. Yet, as became his training, he had the

usual three orthodox heads, which, however, on this occasion were especially apt and helpful in the developing of his great theme. They were:

(1) The Good Shepherd's character.

(2) The Good Shepherd's distress for the lost sheep, and his restlessness until he has found it.

(3) The mercy, compassion, and tenderness of the Good Shepherd.

Never had Simeon preached with more power and acceptance. But it was not until his second head was reached that the preacher seemed to surpass himself.

'Think, frien's, o' that Good Shepherd wanderin' o'er moor an' fen, o'er crag an' through mountain torrent, in order to find his lost lamb. He is weary an' worn wi' his searchin'; of'en an' of'en he drags one foot after anoöther as o' a man footsore an' exhausted, but he cannot find it in his heart to go back whoam wi'out the pore lost lamb. He could'n rest in his bed at night if he did, an' if it wur not safe in th' fold. He ud be thinkin' all th' time o' th' rain, an' th' wind, an' th' wolves wi'out, an' he ud hear his lil'l lost lamb's bleat, bleat, in ev'ry gust o' th' wind that shuddered roun' his house. How could he rest wi' his heart all afire for th' pore lost lammie? . . .

Could yo' rest, moöther, if one o' yo'r lambs wur out amongst th' wolves o' th' worl'?

'... If yo'r pet lamb, father, had wandered from th' fold, could yo' lock an' bar an' bolt the door for th' night, an' then go calmly to bed? Would yo' sleep wi' the precious one out in th' cold, a prey to all th' night-birds? ... Yes,' and Simeon now spoke impressively, and no one could fail to note the personal allusion in his tone as well as in his words, 'yes, yo' might, but th' Good Shepherd, never. Never, never, thank God!' he cried, with tears in his eyes. 'God be ever more merciful than man, kinder an' tenderer than a father, more long-suf—fer—in'—and Simeon lingered on the word—'than a moöther. Yo' say o' th' sinner, "Cut him down," but Jesus Christ our Saviour an' Good Shepherd says, "Spare him anoöther year." Yo' in th' anger o' yo'r heart, say, "Fill oop th' measure o' yo'r iniquity"; but while Christ pleads afore th' throne, God never says that o' any man, an' while the lamp holds out to burn, th' vilest sinner may return. ... '

Jesse went home that night from the service as he had come, without speaking a word to anybody. The trustees' meeting he had been so anxious about in the morning never entered

into his thoughts as he walked away from the chapel. All his thoughts were of the sermon Simeon had preached, and of the things which grew out of it. The conduct of the Good Shepherd towards the lost lamb as portrayed by the preacher, contrasted horribly with his towards his erring child. In the self-righteousness of his heart he had been shutting up heaven against his own flesh and blood.

When he reached home little Ephraim, whom Jesse had put into bed before going out to chapel, was awake and calling for Lucy. The child's cry was another knock-down blow to his father's pride.

Jesse went upstairs.

'What is't, Ephie?' he asked, with a touch of tenderness in his tone.

'Sing "Jesus is oor Shepherd,"' wailed the little one.

That request was another blow. Jesse felt that he was being bruised and humbled.

'Ah can't sing it, Ephie—at least, not th' night.'

'Why not? Lucy always sings "Jesus is oor Shepherd."'

'Lucy shall sing it anoöther night.'

The child sat upright in bed.

'To-morrer night?'

'P'raps not to-morrer, but some night soon.'

His voice was choking. He coaxed little Ephraim to lie down again, and after covering him up once more, went down stairs. He was in sore trouble, but, like the good Methodist that he was, he sought consolation at once in his beloved Bible. And, according to another good old custom, he closed his eyes and, holding the book in his hand, let it open where it would. He thus hoped to be providentially guided. The chapter opened at proved to be that containing the story of the Prodigal Son, and Jesse read it through with bursting heart. It was another blow, and the finishing touch to his humiliation. And, when a few moments later he offered his evening prayer, Lucy's name was not omitted, as had been his practice since her flight. But the burden of his prayer was for himself—for a forgiving spirit and a tender heart.

III.

RIGHTLY PREJUDICED

No one save the two concerned ever knew how it came about, but one morning it was bruited abroad in Woodleigh that Simeon Tandy was going down to Liverpool to seek out Lucy, and to bring her home.

'Eh! man alive, yo'll ha' no end o' trouble,' said the village gossip, Mrs Reeves, to Simeon, when she heard of Simeon's intention; 'it ull be like lookin' for a needle in a bun'le o' hay. Liverpool be a biggish place, Simeon. Ten to one if yo' ever find her. Her may be gone to Ameriky by now. But in case her baint, Simeon, an' still be somewheer in th' big city,' continued the gossip, growing confidential and impressive, 'there be just one hint Ah ud like to give yo' afore yo' go, if yo'll suffer it.'

She waited awhile for Simeon to speak, but as he remained silent, she went on again presently, 'Yo' mak' it a point, Simeon, o' goin' roun' all th' dancin' classes, an poöblic houses

in th' place. Lucy, yo' know, wus allus a bit flighty, an' terr'ble fond o' th' dance when 'ere, an' wus allus mixed oop wi' all sorts o' frivolities. Her ull be sure t' drift to such places. Th' love o' th' worl' be in her, Simeon; Ah 'ont go so far as t' say as how it be bred in her bone, for that ud be a kind o' slander on Jesse, but it be as a fire in her blood, an' her ull be sure t' seek out th' worl'ly an' th' vain.

'Then there be th' theaytres; doant forget to visit 'em, Simeon. Ah've no doubt but that it ull shock yo'r righteous soul to ha' to put a foot in such cesspools o' filth and lewdness, but yo'll ha' to do it, Simeon. Yo' be goin' after th' lost sheep o' th' fold, an' yo'll ha' to search hill and dale, high an' low, in th' gilded hells o' th' ball-room, an' in th' gutters o' th' streets. . . . An' there be th' streets 'emselves. Ah'm more feared o' em, Simeon, than o' anything else. A giddy, young girl like Lucy may ha' fell into th' worst o' roöin by this time, an' sold her very soul an' body to th' Devil.'

'An' what about her Methodist trainin', Mrs Reeves?' suddenly demanded Simeon, with flushed face and flashing eyes. He had suffered Mrs Reeves long enough, and could endure her pessimism no longer: 'What about her Metho-

dist trainin', Ah say? What about th' prayers o' God's people? Be all th' years o' her oop-bringin' to count for nothin?' Th' lessons o' th' Sabbath scheul, th' tex's learnt by heart at home, an' th' bits o' hymns her mother in heaven larnt her, to say nothin' o' th' Catechism, be 'em all to ha' no influence whatsomever 'pon her? Eh! Mrs Reeves, yo' be a woman o' lil'l faith.

'Nay, Mrs Reeves, Ah shall visit none o' th' places yo' speak o'. Lucy ull not be foun' in any one o' 'em. Th' lambs o' th' flock may stray from th' fol', but th' Good Shepherd ull never let 'em go down into th' pit alt'gether.

'No, when Ah gets down to Liverpool, th' first thing Ah'll just do ull be to find out where th' ministers do live, an' ask 'em if ony un be on their class-books o' th' name o' Lucy Stallard. Mebbe 'em won't know her. Mebbe her may not ha' joined society through a feelin' o' unworthiness, or summat o' that sort; but Ah'll be on th' right track, Ah've no doubt, an', at ony rate, her ull sure to be a member of one o' th' congregations. Oh yes, yo' ha' no need o' shakin' yo'r head like o' that way, Mrs Reeves. Ah'm thinkin' as how Ah know what Ah be

sayin'. Ah've faith in God, Mrs Reeves, an' in Methodist larnin' an' doctrine.'

Simeon had never been beyond Spaton or Monksford in his life before, and he therefore found the big city of Liverpool to be a great maze to him.

'It wur nothin' like Spaton,' he explained to John Oakey, when he was telling him the story of his mission, 'there wus such crowds o' foaks bustlin' an' tearin' about in ev'ry direction, an' such terr'ble miles o' streets that Ah soon lost m'head. Ev'ry one Ah met, too, appeared in such a desp'rate hurry that Ah wus feared to ask 'em ony question. Ah've heerd of'en about th' mad struggle for life in oor large towns an' cities, an' Ah've preached a lil'l about 'em, too, in m'time, but Ah never seed onythin' like what Ah seed in Liverpool. Ah couldn't help contrastin' it all wi' th' quiet an' peace o' oor lil'l Woodleigh.

'Well, Ah wandered about th' streets for an hour or more, never once clappin' m'eyes on Lucy. Then it began to grow dark, an' Ah began to get afeared. If night should coom on in th' big city afore Ah'd found shelter for th' night, Ah might die in th' cold streets. Ah grew t' feel terr'ble lonely.

At last Ah went oop an' spoke to a p'liceman.

'"Can yo' tell me wheer th' minister do live?" Ah asked un.

'"Th', what?" says he, quite big, as if he wur a mag'strate an' not a p'liceman at all.

'"Th' minister, th' Methodist minister," Ah told un.

'"No," he says, with a grunt just like one o' yo'r pigs, John Oakey, for all th' worl'.

'Ah wur annoyed, and Ah looked at un straight in th' face; it wur on th' point o' m'tong' to give un a lesson in civility, but he spoke again.

'"Ah can tell yo' wheer th' Bishop do live, if that ull suit yo'; oop in Abercrombie Square," an' he laughed like a man amused.

'"Look yo' 'ere," Ah told un, "Ah've coom all th' way from Glo'ster in search o' poor Lucy, an' Ah was hopin' that a man in yo'r position an' callin' might ha' helped me to find her."

'Well, he picked oop his ears at that.

'"Some un run away from home?" he asked, an' Ah told un, "Yes," for what better could Ah say? "Well," says he, "th' Methodist parson won't find un for yo'; it be very lil'l 'em do know o' such things. What yo' must do be to walk oop an' down Lime Street or Lunnon Road, an' Ah've no doubt but that yo'll soon coom across

her, flauntin' hersel' mongst th' harlots an' brazen hussies yo'll meet."

'"Oor Lucy!" Ah cried, my blood oop in a moment.

'"'Em all drift to that what coom 'ere,' he says, quite unmoved, an' Ah couldn't help thinkin' o' th' words o' Mrs Reeves. But I wouldn't hear o' it.

'"Nay, sir," Ah says, shakin' m' head, "yo' doant know the oopbringin' her ha' had, or yo' wouldn't say that," an' Ah turned away an' left un.

'Bymbye, Ah tried anoöther p'liceman. He wur a man wi' whitish whiskers an' hair, so Ah thought Ah wur safe in speakin' to him.

'"Can yo' tell me," Ah asked un, "wheer Methodist minister do live?" (Yo' see Ah wus careful this time to tell un which minister Ah wanted, for Liverpool be not like Woodleigh, wi' on'y one chapel an sect).

'"Th' Methodist minister!" says he, "Which one?"

'"Th' Wesleyan minister. . . ."

'"Oh, there be a score or so o' 'em in Liverpool," says he.

'M' heart bounded wi'in my breast, an' Ah

felt 'mongst friends at once. It wur real homely to know there wur so many.

'"Ah'm not particular which one," Ah told un, "so as he be th' nearest."

'"Be yo' from th' country?" he asks, looking at me hard.

'Ah told un "Yes," an' then he oop an' said as how he wur a Methodist, an' wi' that Ah told un all th' story o' what had brought me to Liverpool. Well, yo'll hardly credit it in a town-bred Methodist, but he proved just as sceptical as t'other. It be as true as Ah'm tellin' it yo.'

'"Her ull ha' gone to roöin long afore this," he said, an' shook his head orful.

'"Wi' th' prayers o' th' Church o' God aback o' her, an' th' influence o' her Methodist oop-bringin'!" Ah cried; for it hurt me sore to see so 'lightened a man so faithless. "Ah'll never b'lieve it, never. Th' promise be that th' seed shall not return void, an' th' bread cast 'pon th' waters shall be seen after many days."

'Durin' th' next few days Ah went th' roun' o' all th' ministers in th' city, but not one o' 'em knowed Lucy. Two o' 'em wur writin' tickets when Ah called, an' they went through all th' names on th' class-books wi' me, but no Lucy

wur to be foun'. On Sunday mornin' Ah went to one o' th' big city chapels. It wur crowded from floor to ceilin' wi' a vast congregation, but Ah saw no Lucy. In th' afternoon Ah visited two Sabbath scheuls, an' Ah talked a lil'l wi' th' superintendents an' th' teachers, but it wur just th' same. Ah never got a glimpse o' th' pore bairn Ah wur lookin' for. At night Ah worshipped in anoöther big chapel (Eh! it wur a treat to worship there wi' th' great moöltitude) but though Ah looked all roun' th' chapel, an' afterwards stood at th' big gates to watch th' foak coom out, Ah didn't find Lucy. M'heart began t' fail me. Ah began t' think as how Ah'd made a frightful mistake in coomin' to Liverpool at all, an' my knees smote together in dread. Then, all o' a sudden Ah 'membered what Janet Thornbury had said about Lucy bein' likely to mak' off for Ameriky, an' wi' that Ah went an' stood a whole day on th' great landin' stage, watchin' th' emigrants, pore things, goin' off to furrin pairts, but it wur all th' same, an' Ah saw no sign o' pore Lucy. Afore th' week was out, Ah'd been nearly all ower Liverpool, an' a'most in ev'ry Methodist chapel in th' place. Ah wur foot-sore an' a'most heart-brokken.

'Friday night cam', an' Ah wur passin' the

Stanhope-street Chapel. There wur a light in th' vestry, an' Ah heard singin' goin' on wi'in. Some foaks wur also stan'in at th' door, an' others wur goin' quietly in on tip-toe.

'"What be a-goin' on 'ere?" Ah asked one brother.

'"A Band-mittin'," he says, "would yo' like to step inside?"

'"Ah ud," Ah said, for Ah was weary an' jaded wi' walkin', an' Ah know no place better to rest in than th' Lord's house. Besides, Ah could lis'en to th' speriences o' th' brethren while restin'.

'"Yo' be a stranger in these 'ere pairts?" th' good brother asked me.

'"H-mn, Ah be," Ah told un, "but no stranger to God's house," an' Ah followed un into th' vestry.

'Eh! John Oakey, that wur a mittin', to be sure. It be a biggish vestry, that be, but it were full o' foak right oop to th' door, an em' wur singin'—well, Ah on'y wish oor koyer-leader could ha' heerd 'em, he ud never start a noo-fangled tune again, so long as he do live. There be nothin' to beat th' ol' tunes, John, nothin'. Ah knows there be a dead set 'pon 'em now-a-days, but Ah'm for keepin' to th' ol' tunes.

'Em wur good enough for oor fathers, an' we cannot better 'em. All our Woodleigh koyer think o' be to get hol' o' a new tune, no matter whether it do suit th' hymn or not. There be some o' oor hymns, John, that never go well wi' th' new tunes, an' there be nothin' to ekal such tunes as good ol' Job, or Calcutta, or Justification. Well, what do yo' think 'em wur singin' when Ah went in, John? Why, bless yo'r heart, it wur ol' Dedication 'em wur singin' to Hymn number 67; eh, it fairly lifted m'roof off! Ah wur in th' seventh heaven in a moment. Then us afterwards got down on oor knees, an' a brother what had just coom home from sea prayed. Eh! man alive, that wur a prayer. Ah couldn't help thinkin' that us what lives in peace an' quiet on th' land ud pray better, if us ha' on'y been once in peril on th' deep. If yo' could on'y ha' heerd that sailor man thankin' th' dear Lord for bringin' us safe into port again, it ud ha' done yo'r heart good. Then us got to speakin', an' one after anoöther did give their speriences, sharp. No waitin' like there be in Woodleigh for some one to speak. Th' minister he said, "Get oop at once yo' what ha' got onything to say, an' get rid o' yo'r palpitation. Tellin' what th' good Lord ha' done for

yo'r soul be th' on'y safe cure for that malady." An' oop 'em got one after anoöther, just like clock-work. It wur grand.

'"There be a brother yon',' said th' minister presently pointin' to'ards me, "what ha' tried several times to speak. He be a stranger wi' us, Ah do fancy, an' p'raps oor frien's ull give him a chance."

'So oop Ah got in m'turn, an' told 'em what the Lord ha' done for me. An' m'word, just didn't 'em lis'en. Some foaks say as how Ah speak broad; Ah really doant know as Ah do; Ah think Ah speak m' moöther tong' as well as most men; but when 'em wurn't laughin' at me 'em wur cryin', an' fillin' th' vestry wi' their praises.

'Ah wur in th' middle o' it all when Ah sudden heerd such a sobbin' as never wus. Ah turned me roun' sharp, for there wus a soun' o' homeliness even in that bitter sobbin', a tone which Ah fancied Ah'd heerd afore, an' there, on'y two seats away from where Ah wur stan'in', sat oor pore Lucy. For a moment Ah stood stupid an' stunned, but th' nex' her wus on her knees at m' feet, an' us wur boäth cryin' just like two babbies. Then th' whole mittin' broke out into sobs, though not a man or woman o' 'em in th' vestry

knowed what 'em wus cryin' for; 'em just cried for human sympathy an' frien'liness. Then Ah stooped down an' lifted Lucy oop, an' held her tight in m' arms, while, pore lammie, her sobbed to heart-breakin' on m' breast

'"Not on th' ground, Lucy," Ah said, my own heart burstin', "no, yo' just lie near m'heart awhile an' rest. Ah've bin lookin' for yo', dear lammie, all oop an' down this big wilderness o' a town, an' Ah'd a'most despaired o' ever findin' yo'. But Ah've foun' yo' at last; Ah've got yo' safe in m'arms, an' Ah'll not let yo' wander away any more, Lucy.

'"'Em told me Ah should find yo' on th' streets, or in th' ale-house, or th' theaytre. But Ah knowed better, Lucy, an' Ah told 'em it ud just be in th' Lord's House, just where his people be wont t'meet, that yo'd be foun'. 'Em laughed an' sneered an' called me fool; 'Em said Ah didn't know the ways o' th' worl', an' that yo' ud ha' gone to th' Devil long sin'. But Ah knowed th' ways o' yo'r oopbringin', Lucy, an' Ah knowed th' goodness o' oor Heavenly Father, an' that He ud keep yo' from goin' down into th' pit.

'"An' now, Lucy, Ah've coom to tak' yo' whoam again to Woodleigh. Yo'r father ha' sent

me for yo', an' lil'l Ephie be cryin' night an' day for yo'. Yo'll no need to be afeared; yo'r father's heart be softened, an' he be yearnin' to see yo' whoam again. Yo'ull coom whoam, Lucy, 'ont yo'? There ull be no questions asked yo', an' no one ull oopbraid yo'," an' Ah felt th' pore lammie tremble in m' arms. Her couldn't speak a word, her heart was too full, but Ah un'erstood her wi'out words, an' now yon' her be fillin' Jesse's home wi' sunshine.'

All the story? That is all Simeon told of it, but another fragment of it was afterwards communicated in a letter by the minister to the Rev. Theophilus Todd, the superintendent of the Spaton circuit; the rest Lucy herself shall tell you again.

'In the whole course of my long ministry,' wrote the minister, 'I have never witnessed so touching and dramatic a scene. Every one present was simply overwhelmed, and only loud sobs broke the silence that prevailed in the vestry as that grand old man exulted in the finding of the grief-stricken girl. As an example of human compassion when it is "likest God's," I know of nothing that can compare with it, and during the exhibition of it heaven was very near to us all. In common with

almost every one present, I at first thought the girl a penitent seeking mercy, and went forward and asked the old man to let us pray for her, "What would yo' pray for?" he demanded, almost fiercely, in his own rich venacular, which I do not attempt to reproduce, "poor Lucy has been more sinned against than sinning. If you would pray at all, pray that all fathers may have tender hearts, that they may banish austerity from their homes, and that they may not shut up their bowels of compassion from their own flesh and blood."

'Then someone started a hymn, some one at the back of the vestry who did not catch the drift of his meaning. It was a penitential hymn, and set to a minor key.

'"Hold!" he cried lustily, "this is not a time for mourning, but for praise. The lost lamb has been found again," and then he commenced at the top of his voice to sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." We joined him at once with all our hearts, and sang it with him over and over again until it seemed as if our earthen vessels would break, so full were they of glory. I learnt the particulars of the case afterwards: how the harshness of the poor girl's father had driven her from home, how she had

come to Liverpool and had found a situation as housemaid, and how she had been a regular attendant at the Friday night's Band-meeting. I can only compliment you, my dear Mr Todd, upon having such a man of God as Simeon Tandy in your circuit, though I suppose neither Methodism nor God is ever short of such men. It is not our doctrine so much as our people's lives that tell; not our doctrine, but such men as Simeon Tandy that are the marrow of Methodism and the salt of the earth.'

IV.

A MIRACLE OF GRACE

NED THORNBURY came home from Poet Hawley's, where he had been passing an hour in friendly gossip, with his clothes all dripping with the rain.

'Did yo' ever see sich a night, Janet!' he exclaimed, switching the wet from his cap at the kitchen door as he spoke, much to the annoyance of Janet, who had only just finished tidying up the place. 'It be coomin' down in sheets, an' th' wind be summat orful. Ah could hardly get m'breath as Ah coom down th' village; wind wus dead in my face.'

'Well, get off your wet things, and come on to the fire,' said Janet. 'I have just put some fresh logs on, but the wind in the chimney is rumbling fearfully, and sending the smoke down in volumes.'

'That be more bearable than the weather wi'out. Light th' lamp, Janet, draw down th' blind, an' shut out th' sight o' sich a night.'

It was, indeed, a fearful night. Scarcely a soul was abroad in Woodleigh, and, in common with almost all the villagers, the Thornburys gathered round their own bright fireside, and sat listening to the raging of the storm without, the pelting of the rain against the window-panes, the rattling of the doors, and the moaning and the roaring of the wind.

'Jethro Hawley ha' bin sayin' as how he wur 'xpectin' Simeon home th' night,' said Ned, presently.

'Has Jethro heard from Simeon?' asked Janet.

'No, but he ha' had a dream. He says as how he saw Simeon quite plain, an' Lucy wur wi' him. He wur carryin' her in his arms, tenderly, just like th' shepherd do carry th' lost lamb home.'

'Jethro Hawley is given to dreaming,' said Janet, indifferently.

'Yes, but there be summat in Jethro's dreams. D'yo' mind as how he predicted th' epidemic o' small-pox five year agone coom next Eastertide? An' that wur by a dream. Dr Underhill wouldn't b'lieve it at th' time; in fact, he scouted th' idea o' it, but it all coom true as Jethro had said. Foak wur sorry then 'em hadna takken

Jethro's a'vice, an' prepared for't. Ah really b'lieve, Janet, lots o' foaks ud ha' bin spared alive had 'em on'y lis'ened to Jethro's warnin'.'

Janet shrugged her shoulders. She was no believer in dreams. Besides, Jethro Hawley was a poet, and there was no accounting for what freak his imagination might play him.

Just then the rumbling of carriage wheels was heard in the distance outside. Ned went to the window and drew the blind aside.

'Shouldn't won'er at all if this baint 'em now,' he said.

With his face pressed close against the pane, in order that he might the better peer out into the darkness, Ned stood awaiting the approach of the vehicle. It soon drew near, but it was too dark to distinguish anything, and all he saw was a vision of lights as they flashed by. Nevertheless he was strengthened in his suspicion.

''Em be 'em as sure as fate,' he said emphatically, coming back to Janet at the fireside; 'Yon be Simeon an' Lucy, Ah'll be bound.'

'Don't be absurd, Ned,' said Janet, with a show of impatience, and plied her knitting needles more vigorously.

But Ned had lighted upon the truth.

Simeon had planned the time of their return with guile. Much earlier in the day he and Lucy had arrived in Spaton, but he had determined to delay their going on to Woodleigh until darkness set in.

'Then there ull be scarce onybody about,' he had schemed within himself, ''specially if this 'ere rain do keep on, an' th' wind gets oop a bit. Besides, it be Jesse's class-night, an' his lost lamb ull get back into th' fol' again wi'out ado.'

The old home was shrouded in darkness when they hastily alighted at the door and dismissed the carriage. For a returning prodigal there should have been the lighted lamp in the window and the door left on the latch, and, if this were a mere tale, these things should have been provided; but Jesse Stallard was a man of no such sentiment. Since Simeon had gone in search of Lucy, her father had prayed night and day for Simeon's success, but no thought of making preparations for Lucy's return had ever entered into his head. Upstairs there was just a faint glimmer of light showing in the bedroom, but that was from the tiny night-light left with little Ephie, a nightly practice now, though a hateful one to Jesse, but one with which he had been compelled to comply since Lucy's departure

from home. The door, too, was fast; but Simeon had calculated upon this contingency, and now, drawing a key from his pocket, he opened the door without difficulty.

Once inside of the house Simeon soon got a light. A low, smouldering fire blinked in the grate, but the kitchen was cold and cheerless-looking. Thick dust lay, too, on everything, and general untidiness prevailed. Lucy felt a sinking at heart. There was no welcome in this. Simeon had spoken of her father's eagerness to get her home again, but the spectacle before her seemed to belie it. A suspicion of a doubt crossed her mind as to the wisdom of her home-coming, and a faintness came over her. But just then Simeon pointed to a faded photograph set prominently on the mantelshelf, and instantly she was reassured in the step she had taken.

'Yo' see, Lucy, father still loves yo'. He ha'n't forgot yo', an' all th' time yo've bin away yo'r face 'as ever bin afore him.

'An now, Lucy lass, Ah'll be goin'. It baint like as if yo'r father wurn't reconciled to yo', an' it be on'y proper that yo' two meet each other first alone. Ah'll just get home an' pray

to God to strengthen yo'r heart for th' mittin' wi' yo'r father.'

When Simeon had gone, Lucy slipped off her boots and stole upstairs on tiptoe to Ephie's bedroom. The little fellow was lying fast asleep with one arm flung round his head, and the other laid out on the counterpane. He had evidently cried himself to sleep, for his cheeks were still wet. The tears started to Lucy's own eyes at the sight, and bitter self-reproach filled her heart. Her little treasure had plainly been neglected, and she felt that she alone was to blame for it. For, of all men, her father was not the one to learn to act a mother's part towards his lonely child. However much he had softened of late, it could not be expected that so subtle and delicate a feeling could come to him so soon. The fault was hers alone. But it was no time then for vain regrets; there was a houseful of work awaiting her, and preparations to be made for her father's return. She stooped and gently kissed the sleeping child on the forehead, so lightly that it did not waken him, and then she stole softly downstairs again.

The next thing she did was to light a fire, and tidy up the kitchen. This done, she trimmed the lamp afresh, and laid the cloth for supper.

In a little while she had wrought a complete transformation in the place, and the whole appearance and air of the kitchen revealed the touch of a woman's hand.

For a moment or two she stood surveying her work with great satisfaction. Outside the storm raged fiercely, and the chilling swish of the rain fell drearily, but in her father's house warmth and comfort awaited him.

After a time the loud ticking of the clock recalled Lucy to herself. It wanted but ten minutes now to the usual time of her father's return. The discovery frightened her. Now that the crucial moment was drawing so near, her heart began to fail her.

Presently she stole upstairs again to sit by Ephie's bed while he slept, and to wait with trembling for her father. She did not feel strong enough to meet him abruptly face to face. The spread supper table and the changed appearance of the kitchen must first prepare his mind for the meeting, and win for her favour in his sight. Thus she sat, therefore, for what seemed an age to her, listening to the storm, and awed by the ghastly stillness of the house. In the bedroom little Ephie's heavy breathing, and downstairs the singing of the kettle on the hob,

the fitful crackling of the flames as they leapt up the chimney, and the solemn, melancholy, ticking of the clock were the only sounds that disturbed the stillness of the house. And even these only heightened its effect and added to its oppressiveness.

At length another sound fell upon her ears, the sound of footsteps upon the garden path outside. She had no need to go to the window to discover whose footsteps they were; she knew the familiar, firmly-planted steps too well; they were her father's. Her heart almost ceased to beat as she held her breath to listen. They were at the door now, and she heard them halt a moment while the door was opened. A moment afterwards she heard them ring out on the kitchen pavement, and then again halt, suddenly this time, and Lucy knew that her father was standing in astonishment at the transformation that met his eyes.

She was trembling very greatly now, and growing chilled with intense excitement and nervousness. She wished she had remained downstairs after all, but the difficulty now was to dare to go down to meet her father. The little courage that had up to that moment remained with her oozed away altogether. But

an impulse seized her, an impulse due to her woman's heart, which she at once put into execution. She went quietly to the head of the stairs, and, as if nothing had happened, called softly:

'Is that yo', father?'

For just one perceptible moment there was a deep pause before Jesse answered.

'Yes, Lucy,' he said.

'Be th' kettle boilin'?'

She heard a great sigh escape from him, a sigh not of sadness, but of intense relief.

'Yes, it be a-boilin',' he replied the next moment.

'Very well, Ah'll coom down an' get yo' yo'r supper.'

But even then she could not immediately venture down. She went back again to Ephie's bedroom to nerve her heart. Her courage still failed her. It was only on the impulse of the moment that she could act; reflection but increased her difficulty.

Meanwhile Jesse sat awaiting her downstairs, and fidgeting in his chair at her delay. But he soon divined what kept her, and his heart surged within him. He determined to make it as easy as possible for her.

'Lucy!'

'Yes, father.'

'Th' kettle be a-boilin'. Ah'm feared all th' water ull be gone if yo' baint down soon.'

His words went home to her heart. Her instinct told her that her father was as much troubled as she herself was, and that he was changed. The strong, anxious love of a father trembled in his voice, and his old harsh manner was gone. The discovery encouraged her to delay no longer, and she now ventured down.

She found her father sitting in his armchair before the fire reading his bible. His back was towards her, and he did not raise his head when she entered. So she did not see his face.

'A bit o' fire be comfortin' 'pon sich a night as this be,' was all he said.

He was apparently cool and collected, but that only made Lucy the more astonished. She was at her wits' end, and was trembling violently. All her visions of this meeting were being strangely falsified. In the secrecy of her heart, she had planned falling upon her knees at her father's feet, and seeking his forgiveness with tears. But now that the supreme moment had come, she could not do it. Besides, there was

still something repellant in her father's mood which checked her.

'Ah'm feared there be no coffee in th' house,' Jesse presently ventured, still without looking up or even turning his head. He could not yet trust himself to face her, and he was labouring with all his powers to hide his own strong agitation. But he knew her feelings and condition exactly. He could not see her, but he knew that she was standing behind his chair, and he was anxious for her sake to tone down what had yet to follow.

Lucy felt something of this. She read something of pity and mercy in her father's mood, and accepted the situation as it was.

'No,' she said, going to the cupboard, 'there seems to be no coffee.'

'Didn't us drink th' last this mornin'?' he asked.

She proved equal to the occasion.

'That must ha' bin so,' she said, 'for there be none 'ere.'

'A cup o' tea ull be quite as refreshin',' he said. 'Ah think there was a spec' left ower from yesterday in th' caddy in th' pantry.'

Not another word was spoken as Lucy moved silently about preparing the supper, but there

was a quivering in Jesse's voice as he asked the blessing. His emotion did not escape Lucy; she gulped down a rising sob, but said nothing. Her eyes, too, were filmed with mist, but she drooped her head and hid her face from her father; at least, she thought she had hidden it, but, though Jesse made no remark, he saw all. Not once during the whole time of supper did either of them speak of what was uppermost in their hearts, and Jesse purposely steered the conversation into the homeliest gossip.

Lucy was deeply stirred. Simeon's words came back to her, 'No questions will be asked.' Was this the meaning of her father's reticence? Simeon must have wrung some such promise from her father, but she now felt that it was not the wisest thing to have done. Anything was preferable to this studied silence. Nay, she was even anxious to be questioned, and to tell her father all. She was yearning to show her contrition and to make confession. Besides, she felt it mean on her part to offer no explanation. Yet he thwarted her every attempt.

At length Jesse opened the big Bible for the evening's family devotions.

'Father,' gasped Lucy, hurriedly, 'read the fifteenth o' St Luke.'

He looked up at her a moment in sheer amazement. But she had broken through the icy reserve now, and tears were in her eyes.

'Do, father; read it, 'she urged, 'it ull be fittin'.'

'No,' he answered, slowly shaking his head 'Ah cannot, Ah cannot.'

'Then Ah ull read it mysel',' said Lucy, and reached across the table to take the Bible from his hand. But he gently restrained her, and turned to the twenty-third psalm, which he read with broken voice and frequent pausings, while Lucy could do nothing else but weep bitterly.

'That be more fittin',' he said when he had finished.

But Lucy did not think so. Her self-reproach was complete. Besides, her father seemed to take all the blame upon himself for her late conduct, and, that he should do so, pained her beyond expression. But now that he had capitulated, she would do the same. Now that he had come down from his old loftiness of spirit, she too would humble herself to the very dust. Without a moment's further hesitation, she flung herself on her knees at his feet.

'Father, forgive me!' she cried.

He gently raised her head from his knees and got down on the floor beside her.

'An' yo', Lucy, ull forgive *me?*' he pleaded, with strong emotion.

'Father!'

'Ah be to blame, Lucy, Ah've not bin th' father to yo' Ah oughter bin. It wur my conduct what drove yo' from home. God ha' shown me th' pride an' stubbornness o' m' heart—'

'Nay, nay,' wept Lucy, 'it wur my own wickedness. Simeon agreed wi' me in that. He said as how Ah wur too worl'ly-minded, an' it be true.'

'It be not true. Had it bin yo' ud not ha' been 'ere t'night. Th' allurements o' th' worl' ud ha' dragged yo'r soul down to hell.'

'God ha' kept me!'

'An' yo'r own goodness o' heart.'

'No, not that,' she said trembling, 'but th' prayers o' th' church an' m' oopbringin'. Yes, yes, Simeon said so. He told th' mittin' that. He said as how th' prayers o' God's people had followed me, and that Ah wur a miracle o' grace. An' it be true, father. When Ah got t' Liverpool, an' saw all th' sights, th' gay crowds, an' th' houses o' pleasure, Ah near lost m' soul. Ah wur so takken oop wi' all

that Ah saw that it be a mercy Ah'm not ruined body an' soul. Ah never saw th' like afore. All wur so differ'nt from Woodleigh. Here it be all peace an' calm, an' one day much like anoöther; but yon, ev'ry day brought some fresh excitement which m' carnal soul longed to mix wi'.'

'Ah wurn't long in findin' a situation, but th' servants in th' house wur all childer o' th' worl', an' wur always askin' o' me to go wi' 'em to th' theaytre or to music-halls and dancin' places. But Ah couldn't go, Ah couldn't go. Summat wi'in me kept saying, "Doant." Once Ah went wi' two o' 'em as far as th' door o' a music-hall, but Ah didn't enter. Ah said to mysel', "No; it ull grieve father." Ah saw no harm in goin' to Farmer Thompson's barn, but this was differ'nt. Th' whole place seemed full o' sin to me, an' Ah turned away an' left it.

'As Ah went along through th' streets, 'em wur all ablaze wi' gaslights, an' th' air wus filled wi' laughter an' shoutin's. But 'em didn't now affect me. 'Em all seemed hollow an' vain, an' Ah on'y seemed to see 'em as in a dream. M' head was full o' other things. Ah wus thinkin' o' home, o' th' Sabbath scheul,

o' Ephie, an' yo'. It wur Friday night, an' Ah 'membered it wur time o' prayer mittin'. Ah wur pict'ring yo' all in yo'r 'customed places, an' Ah fancied Ah could hear yo'r voice raised in prayer. An' just then Ah did hear th' sound o' singin'. Ah stood a moment an' listened. Then Ah perceived that Ah had come 'pon a chapel unbeknown', and "Depth o' Mercy" wur th' hymn 'em wur singin'. For a moment Ah stood lis'enin', an' then Ah went an' peeped in at th' door. Th' door must ha' creaked a lil'l, for a brother instantly rose an' invited me in, an' at once Ah found mysel' in a Methodist Band-mittin'. Ah wur dazed. Th' good Lord had preserved me from sin, an' had guided m' falterin' footsteps into His house.

'Ev'ry Friday night after that Ah made it a point o' goin' to the Band-mittin'. Missus 'lowed me off when her knowed where Ah wus goin'. Ah'm not a Methodist, her said, but, from past 'sperience, Methodist girls prove good servants, an' so yo' may go. An' there Simeon found me. Ah doant know what Ah felt like when Ah saw first Simeon in th' mittin', but Ah hid mysel' behind a man sittin' in front o' me, an' if Ah had been near th' door Ah ud ha' slipped out. But Ah couldn't wi'out makin' a

scene; the vestry was full o' foak, an' Ah wur hemmed in on all sides. Simeon said o' it afterwards as how Ah wur a pris'ner o' grace.

'From where Ah sat Ah could just get a glimpse o' th' side o' Simeon's face. Ah saw he wur troubled, but, as th' power fell 'pon un, he picked oop won'erful, an' began to cry out just like he does in oor chapel. His praises filled th' vestry, an' foak soon caught his spirit, an' began to cry out too. Then he rose to speak. Ah thought Ah should faint when Ah heard th' old, familiar voice, an' then Ah could sit still no longer; Ah rose an' edged m'way sideways to th' end o' th' form, an' went an' fell at his feet.'

Lucy stopped suddenly. Both father and daughter were still on their knees before each other, and both were blinded with their tears. Lucy had been talking out of a full heart, and, all the while, Jesse had been muttering broken words of praise and prayer. But now two tiny arms were suddenly placed round Lucy's neck, and a head covered with sunny curls was nestling on her bosom. She uttered an exclamation of surprise and looked up. So did Jesse, and there, clinging to Lucy, he got a vision of something in white; for the moment

he knew not what, but thought it was an angel. And so indeed it was—one of God's angels, but in the form of a little child, no other than little Ephie.

'Lucy, Lucy,' he cried, 'yo've coom home again,' and he clung to her tightly, while she answered by hugging him to her breast, 'yo'll not go away again, Lucy?'

'No; never again.'

'An yo'll put me to bed o' nights?'

'Yes'—with tears.

'An' sing Jesus is oor Shepherd?'

'Yes.'

'And say, God bless ev'rybody?'

'Yes! oh, yes!'

'An' God bless father?'

'Yes; God bless him.'

Then for a moment the child paused.

'Father wouldn't say, "God bless Lucy."'

Jesse groaned.

'But Ah can say it now, Ephie. God A'mighty bless m' pore Lucy,' and the stern, strong man broke down utterly.

'God ha' broken m' pride an' m' loftiness. It be a marvel to me that He ha' put oop wi' it so long. It be a won'er that He ha'n't cut me off in th' midst o' m' self-righteousness. It be yo'r

father, Lucy, an' not yo', that be a miracle o' grace. Yo' wur just the one, lost lamb on the mountains, hounded from th' fol' by yo'r father's unfatherliness.'

From that night forward Jesse Stallard was a changed man. His old austerity was dead. His one inflexible rule of life, by which he measured everybody else, was shattered, and he began to see that all characters have not been fashioned in the same mould, that people's dispositions and temperaments vary, and that charity suffereth with them long and is kind. He began to grow gentle, humane, and considerate. Poet Hawley summed up the change in a word one day to a group of gossips gathered in his shop:

'Lucy's escapade did Jesse a world of good. He be greatly mellowed since then.'

Removing
Old
Landmarks

REMOVING OLD LANDMARKS

THE first blow fell upon old Abrum Pryce when the teachers' meeting refused to elect him superintendent of the Sabbath School. (The word 'Sunday' was never used in Woodleigh, except by the barbarians.) It was the teachers' annual practice to elect the new superintendent at each January meeting, and to elect him for one year only. But that usage did not debar the superintendent's re-election at the next annual meeting, and, generally speaking, a good man was allowed to go on year after year without any break. Thus it was that Abrum Pryce had been elected year after year for fifteen years in succession; but an end came to it at last.

Yet it is hardly probable that the end would have come when it did if Abrum had only continued to rule with the same tact that he

had displayed at first. But he had grown autocratic. Fifteen years before, no man in Woodleigh had been better fitted for the position than he, and he had proved this fitness by working along democratic lines; but a love of power had of late years grown up in his heart, and he could no longer brook interference. In the teachers' meeting, if anyone crossed him, he so scowled at him that the poor, unfortunate one shrivelled up into almost nothing, and at once resumed his seat in a state of helpless collapse. If any one dared to suggest any alteration in the old, stereotyped methods of working the school, Abrum at once discomfited that presumptuous brother by the conclusive retort that it 'wur well to let well alone.' Had not the old methods worked well hitherto, and what mortal need for altering? And then, with a contemptuous sneer, he would add something to the effect of young, restless hot-bloods, eager for place and office, as being the only ones who were trying to destroy the harmony of years. From his desk in the school he was accustomed to look loftily round upon the children as if he were a king, and they all his subjects. If by chance—a very rare thing indeed—a boy's animal spirits got the better of

him, and he dared to indulge in a bit of mischief, or if a little girl grew inattentive, or in any other way offended Abrum's watchful eye, he would instantly stalk from his desk towards the wretched offender, with the air of an executioner, and soundly box the little one's ears. The children of the school had grown to fear him, and to look upon him as something of an ogre instead of a kind friend. His very 'Silence!' was enough to make them tremble, and to bring a hush on the school so that a pin might have been heard to drop, while his frequent admonitions, from his place at the desk, to the teachers themselves in regard to the conduct of their classes, were sufficient to drive every willing worker from the school. Indeed, if the love of God had not been in their hearts, scarcely a teacher would have been left at the end of Abrum's strict regime. But at last the thing grew unendurable, and Thomas Tarling, a man beloved by all, was elected in Abrum's place.

'Us 'll lose un from Sabbath-scheul alt'gether now,' said John Reeve, as he and Dick Kittling went home from the meeting together.

'Yo' doant know Abrum Pryce if yo' think so,' Dick replied; 'Abrum ull coom just as

reg'lar as afore, if it be on'y to critikize the new sooper.'

'At ony rate, his power be brokken, an' un ull domineer ower us no longer.'

'He be Society Steward yet, yo' know.'

'H—mn, but he ull be driven out o' that nex'.'

'At th' nex' annual meetin', no doubt. This be but th' first blow, th' night.'

And no doubt it was; but that year, at all events, the blow was not followed up. For, despite Abrum's faults, he had his following, and he was by no means the man he appeared to be. Only in relation to chapel and school affairs was he so intolerant of others, and even this sprang from an excess of zeal. Like one of old, he might have truthfully said, 'I am very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts.' And at heart the seemingly hot-tempered old man was as a child.

'No, it ud never do to remove un this year,' said John Oakey emphatically, when the young bloods mentioned the matter to him; 'after the action o' th' teachers' meetin', it ud be hard an' cruel.'

'But Abrum ha' been steward for ten year or more!'

'And as for me,' said John Oakey, who himself was also a leader, 'he can be steward for anoöther year. Yo' sure-*ly* doant want to drive Abrum out o' chapel alt'gether?'

'But doant yo' think, John, it be about time there wur a change?'

'Ah'm not sayin' as how it baint, though Ah do say as how this baint th' time to mak' it. Wait anoöther year or so.'

And so for still another year those hot for Abrum's dismissal had to wait; for, a week afterwards, the leaders' meeting again re-elected him senior Society Steward.

Of course the young bloods were furious.

'It be a burnin' shame!' exclaimed Dick Kittling when he heard of it, 'and that be all Ah can say. Methodism be like no other church, or th' congregation would be 'lowed a word in th' election.'

'We *are* Methodists, you know,' said the minister to whom Dick spoke freely, 'and not Congregationalists.'

'But think o' it. Fower leaders an' two stewards in Woodleigh, an' 'em manage all th' business o' th' chapel 'mongst 'emselves. Us be never consulted——'

'There's the chapel committee, you know.'

'Chapel kom-it-ee! 'Em on'y ask it to meet when 'em want it to gather money. An' then 'em tell it that it ha' no v'ice in th' spendin'. Th' spendin' be a question for th' Trustees, 'em d' say. Ah'm clean sick o' it all, an' no more chapel kom-it-ees for me.'

From the minister Dick got no sympathy, and so he swung angrily away. Later on he met Ned Thornbury, and went over the whole discussion again with him.

'Ah well, Dick lad,' said Ned, 'yo be on'y kickin' 'gainst th' pricks, an' as Abrum hissel' of'en says, yo'd best let well alone. Th' leaders' meetin', yo' know, be a law to 'emselves.'

'Ah'll leave t' chapel alone,' exclaimed Dick passionately, 'Ah'd rather go ower to Cleeve Church, an' hear Parson Ellison.'

'Yo'll mebbe get a lil'l bit o' larnin' in fox-huntin' there, but Ah'm doubtin' whether yo'll get ony spiritual food. . . . Parson Ellison ull never suit yo', Dick.'

'Suit me or no, Ah'm going' . . . Ah'm not goin' to sit in Woodleigh chapel ony longer, an' see things carried on as 'em be. 'Em can tak' m'name off th' class-books as soon as 'em likes.'

Dick kept his word, and next Sabbath went over to Cleeve Church to worship. But on his

way home again, he met Simeon Tandy coming up the lane.

'Yo' be makin' a fine mistak', Dick,' said Simeon, stopping him.

'Whether or no, Ah've done wi' th' Methodists for ever,' Dick replied defiantly.

'No, lad, yo' baint,' said Simeon with unction, 'Us baint goin' to let yo' go from us so easy as that. Yo' be a child o' Methodist trainin' an' parentage, an' it be oor duty to shepherd yo'. Yo've kicked ower th' traces a lil'l like a restless horse, but yo' must coom back t'chapel th' night.'

'Ah'll not put a foot i'side th' place again.'

'Ya, yo' will. Man alive, doant yo' see th' silly yo' be makin' o' yo'rsel'? The wrong what yo' complain o', can never be righted if yo' put yo'rsel' out o' coört. Yo' be throwin' yo'r franchise away.'

'Franchise indeed!'

'There be th' Quarterly Mittin', yo' know; yo' can bring for'ard a motion there. . . . But if Ah wur yo', Dick, Ah'd say nothin' more about it. Foak ull on'y be sayin' as how yo' want stewardship yo'rsel'.'

'Foak ud talk nonsense then, an' 'em ud know it. . . . But Ah've heard that kind o' thing

afore; in fact, it be allus th' same when a man tries to improve things a bit. 'Em what ha' grown grey in office, be th' first to turn roun' an' snap at one's throat. No, it baint for mysel' Ah seek, but baint there other men? Why doant 'em appoint yo', for instance?'

'Ah've never coveted office, Dick.'

'That baint th' question.'

'Besides, Dick, yo' heard what oor minister did say, as how it baint a proper thing to appoint a local praicher? Yo' see us be so of'en planned out, that he thinks us could'n attend to th' duties.'

'Rubbish! ——'

'Ah udn't say that, if Ah wur yo', Dick. It 'pears so disrespectful to'ards th' minister, an' un a servant o' God.'

'Do yo' agree wi' un?'

'It baint for me t' say, an' Ah allus tries to be subject to th' powers that be. There be no power, Dick, but o' God. It be a lesson Ah think yo' ought to larn.'

'What did Muster Todd say?'

'Well, he baint oor minister.'

'Muster Todd be th' sooper o' th' circuit, an' Ah should think he oughter know what be right an' proper. It be creditably reported that he

advised oor minister to mak' a change this year, but oor minister be a man o' straw, an' he be feared o' Abrum. . . . Here he cooms! Ah'm goin'; Ah could never stan' to talk wi' un. Good-mornin', Simeon.'

But Simeon cleverly detained Dick until the minister came up to where they were standing. The Reverend Job Eachus was the name of the minister, and he lived 'ower to Bycombe,' but that morning he had been preaching at Gretton, and was just then on his way to visit Widow Perry, whom report said was dying. In a few minutes the discussion was renewed.

'It is a question entirely for the leaders' meeting,' said the minister stiffly, 'and altogether out of our province to discuss it here.'

'Then us'll not discuss it,' said Dick haughtily, yet with an undercurrent of 'Why not?' running through his words. 'For mysel' Ah've no wish to do so. Ah've said all Ah've got to say 'pon th' subject.'

'If a member has any complaint,' began the minister, when Dick interrupted him.

'Well, what then? Let 'em sen' it to th' leaders' meetin', yo' be goin' t'say?'

'Certainly.'

'To a secret conclave o' which no one knows

anything 'xcept 'emselves? Half-a-dozen old fogies what say to each other, "Yo' scratch my back, an' Ah'll scratch yo'rn." Pheugh! If Woodleigh Methodists ud be on'y guided by me, 'em ud stop all supplies till 'em knowed summat about what was goin' on of.'

And, having delivered himself of this ultimatum, Dick turned away in a rage.

'What would the young man have!' exclaimed the minister, holding up his hands in a shocked manner, 'How very unbecoming of him! But why does he, and why do those who sympathise with him, want a change in the stewardship?

'Ah'm not their spokesman,' Simeon answered guardedly. As a matter of fact, he greatly sympathised with the young bloods' complaint, but he had never let his opinion be known. But now he was driven to declare it.

'Yes, but what do you think?'

For a while Simeon did not answer. The two men walked along together in silence, and then the minister repeated his question.

'Well, if yo' really want to know my mind 'pon th' subject,' Simeon said at last, clearing his throat, 'Ah'll give it yo' in a few words: Ah do think it be about time that there wur a change.'

The minister was dumfounded. He had fully counted upon Simeon's sympathy in this matter.

'It baint nither good for th' cause, or for oor young men that things should go on much longer as 'em be doin'. If it be on'y for peace' sake there ought to be a change. Besides, us want to give oor young men an int'rest in Methodism, an' Ah'm feared 'em ull be lost to us if summat baint done.'

'Well, who would you put in Abram Pryce's place?'

'That baint for me t' say.'

'And it would be difficult for me. There isn't another man in the place I could put my finger upon.'

The personal slight in the words Simeon passed over with magnanimity.

'Sure-*ly*,' he said, 'yo' doant mean what yo' say! Baint there plenty o' men in th' chapel t' select from?'

'Plenty,' said the minister sententiously, and his tone betrayed his strong annoyance, 'who *desire* the office, but who are not fit for it, while those who are fit will not accept it.'

So things went on for another year much the same as they had done for a dozen years, and Abrum still held his position as senior steward

of the Woodleigh chapel. Of course he knew all about the grumblings of the young bloods, and even the talk of the minister and Simeon had reached his ears, but he still calmly pursued the even tenor of his way. So long as he lived, he told his wife he should remain steward of the chapel, and nothing on earth would make him resign his position. But that decision was not generally known in the village, and it was commonly thought that Abrum would have the good grace to resign at the next annual meeting. And, indeed, in a moment of strong resentment, he had himself led the people to think so.

'Ah'll ha' done wi' it all coom December nex',' he had confided to Simeon, and the local-preacher had used the confidence to allay the prevalent ill-feeling.

But, as the year drew to its close, Abrum changed his mind; at least, the people thought so, though the decision made known to his wife was the only one that ever honestly influenced him.

'Ah'd really wunce thought,' he said one day to Simeon in Jethro Hawley's shop, 'to ha' given it all oop, but Ah cant. It ud be like givin' oop th' Lord's work.'

'Yo'll simply pass it on to another,' said

Simeon, alarmed for what might be the outcome of this decision.

'And,' added Jethro tartly, 'the work will not suffer because you have done with it. Perhaps it may even get on better without you.'

But the shot was ineffective. Abrum's feelings lay under a skin of pachyderm, and were difficult to touch. Yet he skilfully defended himself.

'There baint anoöther man ud do th' work for th' chapel as Ah've done. Early mornin' an' late night Ah've toiled for th' glory o' Zion, an' in season an' out o' season.'

And it was true. Abrum had done all and more than he said. He had taken a peculiar delight in looking after the fabric of the chapel, so that every stone of the building had grown precious to him. With his own spade, and his own unassisted labour, freely given, he had himself laid all the surface drains round the sacred edifice, and it was his pleasure and pride to keep these drains always clean and sweet. Once a year, too, he was accustomed to mount a ladder, and clean out all the troughing round the building, so that when the winter rains came the water would run off the roof easily, and not lodge to set up a damp. And this was not all.

Even the little grass plot in front of the chapel was as neatly kept as the best garden lawn in England, and it was Abrum's hands that had laid down the turf, and that kept the grass neatly trimmed. The evergreens which beautified the chapel's appearance had all been supplied by him, and he had carefully nurtured them into robust growths. Nor was this all. For years Abrum had acted as unpaid chapel-keeper—he cleaned the windows, swept the floors, lit the fires in the winter, looked after the trimming of the lamps, and twice a year, out of his own pocket, paid some of the women of the village to wash the floors, and to assist him in a thorough cleansing of the whole interior. There was not a chapel in the circuit kept so spick-and-span and so free from dust as Woodleigh, and the credit of it all was Abrum's. Little wonder, then, that he clung so tenaciously to office. A fond mother suddenly torn and separated from the sweet embraces of her darling child could not have been more pained than Abrum at the bare thought of it. But the first blow had fallen, and the action of the teachers' meeting only prepared the way for the final blow.

Before the next annual meeting the superin-

tendent minister took the matter into his own hands.

'There really must be a change this year,' he said to his colleagues, 'it will never do to let things go on any longer in this lax way. Half of the people of the place are grumbling.'

'I cannot see why,' replied his colleague, the Bycombe minister, who had also pastoral oversight of Woodleigh, though, on account of its distance away, he was rarely seen in Woodleigh.

'Generally speaking,' said the superintendent, 'there is little ground for these grumblings, I know, but here it is, and we must allay it. Besides, you know, the rule is that stewards shall remain in office for three years. That is the maximum by Conference legislation.'

'Abrum Pryce will never submit to be changed.'

'What!'

'It will kill him.'

'Nonsense; men do not die of such little things.'

'You have no idea how intensely Abrum loves his chapel.'

'So do others in Woodleigh, I trust.'

'Yes, but you do not know Abrum Pryce as I do.'

'Well, it is for his own good, as well as for the good of Methodism in Woodleigh, that there should now be a change, and I purpose nominating another at the next meeting.'

'Who?' asked the Bycombe minister.

'Well, I have been thinking of John Oakey. Would he not suit?'

'Yes; if there is to be a change, no one could be better. John Oakey's appointment would cut two ways. It would remove the cause for grumbling, and, at the same time, keep out the grumblers. But have you spoken to Abrum?'

'Not yet. I will see him to-day.'

But, even to the superintendent, Abrum proved an enigma.

'Now, don't you think yourself,' the superintendent asked blandly, after having gone over all the *pros* and *cons* of the case with him, 'that a change at this juncture is desirable?'

'M' thoughts be m' own,' Abrum answered tersely, after a prolonged pause.

'It is as much for your good as for the good of the cause that I suggest it,' urged the minister.

'Yo' think so?'

'I do think so, and I am sure you will also on reflection.'

Abrum did not answer. His face had grown set and pale.

'You understand me, don't you?'

'Ah could hardly say that much, but Ah hear yo'.'

'For your own sake, it is not well that people should have anything to say, and, for the sake of Methodism here, it is well that others should be given a more direct interest in the cause.'

But Abrum would not commit himself, and the perplexed superintendent had perforce to leave him. Yet, despite Abrum's obstinacy, the superintendent's purpose was not changed. At the next annual meeting he was as determined as ever to nominate John Oakey, and so put an end to this unpleasant grumbling.

The night for the meeting came. In the service that preceded it, all the leaders were present in the chapel save one—*Abrum*. From his place in the pulpit, the superintendent was quick to notice the steward's absence, and it made him uneasy. Why had not Abrum come to the service? The minister had never known him to miss the week-night service before. But he dismissed the subject from his mind with the

thought that something of a special nature had probably detained the steward, but that he would surely put in an appearance at the after-meeting. The hope, however, was doomed to disappointment.

'Where is Brother Abrum Pryce to-night?' the superintendent asked in the vestry after the service.

'He's took badly,' some one told him.

'Ill, is he?'

'Got a bit o' a cold on'y,' some one else explained.

'Not obliged to keep to his bed, I hope?'

'No, not that bad.'

'I am sorry to hear of his illness,' said the superintendent, 'We should have liked to have seen him present with us to-night. I hope he will be better in a day or two.'

Then the business of the meeting was proceeded with, and John Oakey put into the stewardship in place of Abrum, a record being made in the minute-book of his long and faithful services.

The grumblers hailed the change with delight when they heard of it, though it was not the radical change for which they had hoped. As a leader, John Oakey was already one of the

'select circle,' and what they had most desired was the appointment of an independent member of the congregation.

But to Abrum the change was a terrible blow, and he took it so much to heart that in less than three months he was a dead man. The night before he died he was seen wandering round the chapel as if it had some fatal fascination for him. It was a bitterly cold night, and a keen north-east wind was blowing, but Abrum heeded it not. Simeon Tandy, who came upon him suddenly in the darkness, tried to persuade him to go home out of the cold, but he would not budge.

'Who be 'em what ha' loved her like Ah ha' done!' he wailed almost hysterically, 'An' to think that 'em could ha' thrust me out! . . . . But Ah've not done wi' 'em yet, Ah've not done wi' 'em yet.'

A statement which, after his death, was abundantly proved. For then it became known, for the first time, that Abrum had some years before effected an assurance upon his life for three hundred pounds for the sole purpose of clearing off the debt of his beloved chapel.

The Making Of a Minister

THE MAKING OF A MINISTER

'ARE there any to come on trial?'

That is one of the usual questions asked quarterly at every local preachers' meeting in Methodism, and the superintendent had just put the question to the brethren of the Spaton circuit, holding their meeting that September quarter in Bycombe.

'There be one young brother ower to Woodleigh, as Ah ud like to mention,' said Simeon Tandy, as the superintendent paused a moment.

All the brethren in the room turned their eyes upon Simeon, and kept silence to listen.

'Joshua Perry be th' young brother Ah do mean.'

'What! Widow Perry's son?'

Simeon assented.

'Ah'm sure Ah doant know a more godly

young man right throughout th' circuit, an' as a preacher, Ah think he ud soon become a credit to th' circuit an' to Methodism.'

'I am glad to hear you say it,' said the superintendent kindly. 'We certainly need some other local brethren at Woodleigh. Let me see, you are the only one living there, Brother Tandy?'

'Th' on'y one,' said Simeon, 'for th' last twenty years.'

'Then I judge you have done your share of preaching there?'

'More'n my share,' replied Simeon; 'Ah've filled oop all th' gaps on a'most ev'ry occasion.'

'And now you suggest the name of Brother Joshua Perry to come on the plan?'

'Ah do, an Ah'll look for great things from un.'

'Will you move it?'

'Yes.'

'How will the young man's name appear, Mr Superintendent?' asked a Spaton brother.

'What would you suggest, Brother Tandy?' queried the superintendent. 'On Trial?'

'Yes, Ah think he be fit for't.'

'The usual course in this circuit,' explained the Spaton brother, 'is to give the beginner a

quarter's trial before putting his name on the plan.'

'You could denote him,' said another, 'as a "star" or a "dagger."'

'Very well, brethren,' replied the superintendent, 'our young brother shall appear on the plan for this quarter as a "star," and either myself or one of my colleagues shall hear him preach before our next meeting, as well as one or two of the brethren.'

On his way home from the meeting, Simeon Tandy called upon the Perrys to tell them the news.

'Baint Joshua indoors?' he asked, after taking the chair the widow dusted for him.

'He be gone ower to th' scheul.'

Simeon opened his eyes questioningly.

'Scheulmaister ha' offered to give un a bit o' larnin' o' nights, an to help un on a bit.'

'Ah'm fine pleased to hear o' it,' said Simeon; 'larnin' be ev'rything nowadays, an' a man can't 'xpect to mak' much out in th' worl' unless un ha' got more o' book larnin' than ever th' past generation wur 'xpected to ha'. . . . What do Joshua think o' bein'? Not a farm-labourer all his life, Ah should hope?'

'Indeed no, Simeon. Joshua be a lad wi'

thoughts o' summat higher. But he be young yet.'

'Eighteen or thereabouts?'

'Nineteen this harvest.'

'Well, baint it time he had begun to mak' oop his mind?'

For just a little space Widow Perry sat silent and thoughtful.

'Joshua's mind be already made oop,' she said, and then she stopped abruptly.

Simeon waited for her to proceed.

'He ha' had no other thought sin' he were a babby.'

Still Simeon did not speak, but sat in a waiting mood, his eyes keenly searching Hannah Perry's face.

'A Methodist praicher be what his heart be set on. But Ah of'en tell un that it be a callin' he cannot settle for hissel' like he might do if he wur wantin' to be a carpenter or a smith ower to th' smithy wi' Ned Thornbury, but that he must just wait for th' call o' God, an' th' Church.'

'Ah should think,' said Simeon, 'he ud never wish to be a praicher if un had not e'en now heard th' call o' God.'

'He ha' heard it. It be like a fire in his blood, an', again an' again, when he be quiet oopstairs

in his own bedroom, Ah've heard un groan, 'Woe is me if Ah praich not th' gospel!' But he lil'l knows as how Ah do hear un, an' all Ah can do for un be to pray that his way may be opened.'

'Then why doant he set to praichin' at once?'

'Yo' see, Simeon, there be th' call o' th' Church yet, an' Joshua be not th' lad to move until that be given.'

'Ah'm not so sure,' said Simeon reflectively, 'that he be right in that view o' it. There be allus th' highways an' hedges, an' no call o' th' Church be needed for 'em. . . . But Joshua be young yet, an' mebbe feared a lil'l. . . . . Yet he needna wait ony longer. Ah've coom to un to-night wi' th' call o' th' Church.'

Hannah Perry clasped her hands together in great thankfulness.

'It be just what Ah've prayed for ever sin' he wur born,' she said.

'Well, th' brethren ha' this day put un on th' plan as a "star," an' his way now be open. . . . Ah do hope he ull prove a blessin' to th' worl'.'

'He will!' exclaimed the thankful mother; 'God ull mak' him a great blessin' . . . Ah do know it, an' Ah've knowed it for years . . . Ah'd a vision one night o' Joshua as a great

praicher, praichin' to crowds o' foak in a great church. Ah can shut m' eyes, an' see that same vision as plain as plain can be at this minute, though it be ower ten years now sin' Ah saw it first. Joshua stood in th' pulpit, his face glowin' wi' his message, an' his eyes full o' love for perishin' souls. A thousand oopturned faces wur lookin' oop to him—'em wur spellbound; and then th' power o' God fell 'pon em', and cryin' an' sobbin' broke out in ev'ry part o' th' chapel. Men an' women cried out for mercy; an' Ah saw Joshua go down from th' pulpit, an', takin' one an' anoöther by th' hand, point 'em to the Lamb o' God. . . . It wur on'y a vision, Simeon, but it ull come true, it ull come true.'

'Ah b'lieve it will,' said Simeon fervently. 'When Joshua wur but a lil'l lad, Ah heard his father say as how he wur born to be a Methodist praicher, an' Ah've never forgot that sayin' sin'. Ah've been watchin' un all these years, an' Ah ha' seen Joshua grow oop thoughtful an' kind; an' sin' his conversion in th' Sabbath Scheul, he ha' bin a faithful member o' society, an Ah do b'lieve, Hannah, yo'r vision ull sure-*ly* coom true.'

But Joshua's mother, and Simeon, were the only ones in the Spaton circuit who had such

high opinion of his ability, or such confidence in his future. A raw, uncouth, country lad, what could be expected from him? The lads who made a mark in the world came from the towns and the big public schools. Not that there were no niches in the world for country lads to fill, but they were not high ones; only lads of exceptional ability, blessed with every opportunity, could possibly attain to the highest positions, and, even of such, only few could hope to succeed. Yet Joshua Perry had not preached many times before men began to prick up their ears. From village to village, through the Spaton circuit, the Methodists soon were talking about nothing else but of the Woodleigh 'star,' and invitations to preach poured in plentifully upon Joshua. By the December Quarterly Meeting, his fame was in all the churches.

'The young man is a genius,' said the superintendent warmly; 'and I have no hesitancy in now proposing that he come on trial. In all the thirty years of my ministry, I never remember hearing a young brother who so favourably impressed me.'

'What I was particularly pleased with,' said a Bycombe brother, 'was his delivery . . . '

'Eloquent,' put in another brother.

'Powerfully so,' said a third.

'Yes; a kind of subdued power,' said the Bycombe brother.

'That was so,' said the superintendent; 'the young man kept himself well in hand, and appeared to have a wonderful reserve force behind it all. But what pleased me most of all was the matter of the sermon. It was doctrinal and thoughtful, and all so properly arranged. Every point led so naturally on to another, and all to the great climax at the close. Such preaching, brethren, cannot but do a great deal of good;' and the superintendent looked round upon the brethren as if he were expecting their simultaneous acquiescence to the views he expressed.

A Spaton brother, well known for his critical ability, rose to his feet.

'I hardly like speaking at all,' he said, with some hesitation. 'So many good things have been said of the young brother, that it is no pleasant task to me to throw a little cold water upon all that has been said; but, in justice to all concerned, I feel it my duty to do so.'

A dead silence had fallen upon the meeting,

and all eyes were turned towards the Spaton critic.

'My view was that the sermon I heard him preach wasn't his own.'

The superintendent sat bolt upright in his chair. The critic went on.

'I am inclined to think that the sermon was borrowed.'

'Stolen, you mean?' asked the superintendent harshly.

'Well, I didn't want to put it so strong, but, in effect, that is what it amounts to. I really don't think that the sermon was original.'

'This is a very serious charge,' said the superintendent, looking round upon the brethren.

'I don't bring it as a charge; I only just mention it. I considered it my duty to do so; I would not have been faithful to this meeting if I had not.'

'Just so, just so,' said the superintendent, 'Brother Harris does quite right to express his views . . . Still, it is a charge. If our young brother is appropriating other men's sermons, it is a very serious matter indeed. Personally, I did not gather that opinion on listening to him.'

'I cannot fix the sermon,' said the critic, 'but

I certainly have read something very like it in an old volume of sermons.'

While this conversation was going on, Simeon Tandy had been sitting quietly listening, but now he managed to put in a word.

'There be none o' us 'riginal,' he said.

'No, I suppose not,' said the superintendent, 'but then a man must let his reading and observation filter through his own individuality, and so make it his own.'

'Ah doant know anything about that,' said Simeon, 'but what Ah do know be this, Joshua Perry be praichin' his own sermons.'

'You say so?' asked the superintendent with plain delight.

'Ah do say so, and fearlessly. Ah know un too well to b'lieve un would dress oop in other men's clothes.'

'Is it possible, Brother Tandy,' asked the critic, as if he were putting a clinching question, 'that a young fellow of Joshua Perry's upbringing could produce such stuff as he preaches?'

Joshua ha' bin born wi' a gift, an' he ha' that by nature which no amount o' book-larnin' could ever give un. It be as the sooper do say, Joshua be a genius.'

'But even a genius must have something to fall back upon!'

'Be it th' matter o' th' sermon yo' critikize?'

'Yes.'

'Ah s'pose yo' doant charge un wi' usin' anoöther man's v'ice as well as his sermons?'

The critic looked at Simeon in surprise.

'Yo' doant go so far as that?'

'I am at a loss to understand your drift.'

'Mebbe; but not my meanin'. Yo'll 'low that oor young brother ha' a talent in his v'ice?'

'Yes, he certainly seems gifted that way, but——'

'Then baint it possible that he be also gifted in mind an' in heart?'

That was an unanswerable argument, so Joshua Perry was put 'On Trial,' and, for the next twelve months, went up and down the Spaton circuit preaching the everlasting gospel.

During these twelve months, Joshua's fame grew steadily and vastly. Requests came pouring in upon the superintendent from all parts of the circuit to plan Joshua at certain chapels, and, wherever he preached, a great crowd of people came together. Even in the remote villages it was just the same; chapels, where the congregations formerly had been

only a handful of people, now became packed to the very doors with eager listeners. Oftentimes people would walk miles, from one village to another, for the purpose of hearing the young brother 'On Trial,' and his praise was in all men's mouths. It was not, however, until the second quarter of trial that the superintendent ventured to plan him at the circuit chapel, and then only at the specific request of Aaron Priestly, the circuit steward.

'I hear great things of the young man,' he said to the superintendent, 'why not plan him with us a Sunday?'

It was a big request, and the superintendent naturally hesitated. Spaton chapel paid its full share to the Quarterly Board, and was therefore entitled to a minister every Sunday. He felt that it would be a daring thing to rob it of its right.

'Why do you hesitate?' asked Aaron; 'Don't you think the young man capable of filling the Spaton pulpit?'

'It is not that. From all I hear I think he would satisfy the most fastidious critic, but——'

'That he is only a local? If that be all, I will take the full responsibility of it. Plan him, plan him.'

Of course Joshua Perry knew nothing of this conversation, and when his next plan reached him, he was no little amazed to find himself 'put down to preach at the circuit "Cathedral."'

'I would much rather it had not been so,' he said to his mother; 'I am only "On Trial" yet, and some of the older brethren may not like it. I notice that no other local is planned at Spaton.'

'Other locals be sometimes planned there.'

'Only very rarely, and then only such men as Simeon Tandy, and a few such others. I really think I will write to the superintendent and ask him to get some one in my place.'

He seemed in so much distress about the appointment that his mother did not like vigorously to oppose him, but she quietly tried to dissuade him from carrying out his purpose.

'Ah think, Joshua, th' call to praich in Spaton chapel be o' God. . . . Yo' ha' served God well in a lower sphere, an' now He be callin' yo' to a higher one. Ah really doant think Ah'd refuse to praich if Ah wur yo'. . . . P'raps yo'd better pray ower it.'

The very thing Joshua had intended doing; but, after an hour of secret communion with God

in his own bedroom, he was even more fully determined than before to write his letter to the superintendent.

Aaron Priestly was in the superintendent's house when Joshua's letter arrived, and, after the superintendent has glanced hastily through it, he handed it to Aaron.

'This is grand,' said Aaron, after reading it; 'simply grand.'

'You think so?'

'I begin to love the young man even before I know him. . . . But of course you must not oblige him. The young brother is made of the right kind of mettle, and I wish all our brethren were blessed with the same spirit of humility.'

'His request is just what I expected,' said the superintendent; 'Joshua Perry has not only gifts but graces, and I have no shadow of doubt but that this request is genuine.'

'No doubt about it,' said Aaron warmly; 'the whole tenor of the letter goes to show it. What will you do?'

'I must write to him, and urge him——'

'You will not be going over to Woodleigh before Sunday next?'

'No.'

'Perhaps Mr Eachus could see the young brother for you?'

The superintendent stroked his chin thoughtfully.

'I don't know. . . . I am inclined to think that it might have more weight if Brother Tandy called upon him.'

'Just the very thing. Get Brother Tandy to put it to him as a matter of duty. . . . And shall I write him as well? The young man is to be my guest on Sunday, and I might easily drop a line saying that we were expecting him, and tell him how we are praying for him.'

'Do!' said the superintendent with warmth.

So next morning Joshua was favoured with the receipt of two letters—one from the superintendent, and one from the circuit steward.

'I am afraid,' he said to his mother regretfully, after quietly reading the superintendent's letter, 'that there will be no getting out of my going to Spaton. The superintendent says I have been planned there by request, and that the people will be greatly disappointed if I don't go.'

'Th' hand o' God be in't,' said his mother devoutly. She was really deeply moved, as her moist eyes showed, but she was repressing her emotion with a strong hand. Not for worlds

would she influence her son, though she considered it her bounden duty to guide him.

This letter is from Mr Priestly,' said Joshua, after glancing at the second one.

'The circuit steward?'

'Yes; he says I'm to be his guest on Sunday.'

Hannah Perry clasped her hands in joyful amazement. Joshua went on reading.

'We are looking forward to a time of refreshing, and our hearts are going out in prayer to God for you. . . .'

'Thank God!' Mrs Perry could not help ejaculating.

'Mr Priestly hopes I am well, and he also sends kind regards to you, mother.'

The mention of the kind regards to the widow quite overcame her. It almost took her breath away. She had not been aware before that Mr Priestly knew of the existence of such a poor nobody as she, but she soon realised (and with joy) that she was becoming famous through her more famous son.

'Th' Hand o' God be in't,' was all she could say, and then sat silently awhile in happy meditation.

Shortly afterwards, Simeon Tandy came in.

'Joshua, lad, what be all this blather Ah do hear o' yo'r goin' t' neglect yo'r appointment at Spaton next Sabbath?'

Joshua was dumfounded.

'Th' sooper do say as how yo' ha' written askin' him to 'xcuse yo'. Now, Joshua, that ull never do. It be yo' th' foak do want, an' praich yo' must. . . . What do it matter to yo' who be planned at Spaton, or who baint? Yo'r duty be to look after yo'r own business, an' to go about all that th' Lord ha' called yo' to wi' singleness o' heart. Havin' preached in th' surroundin' villages yo' must needs now go oop to Jerusalem to testify; it be th' Lord's will, an' yo' must not disobey it.'

'An' one bit o' a'vice Ah must give yo', Joshua, doant yo' attempt to mak' a new sermon atween this an' then. What suits Woodleigh foak ull suit Spaton foak, an' yo' must give 'em an old horse. Yo'll on'y put yo'rsel' in a muddle if yo' attempt to ride a noo un. Give 'em what yo' gave us last Sabbath for one o' 'em.'

His retreat thus blocked, Joshua felt that he could not do other than preach at Spaton on the next Sabbath, and so the few intervening days were spent in quiet preparation. Not,

however, in regard to the sermons, for those were already prepared, and Simeon's advice about preaching tried ones was wholly congenial to Joshua; but there was still the preparation of the heart.

Next Sabbath, therefore, Joshua appeared in the Spaton pulpit. The congregation, in point of numbers, was a poor one, and a good deal below the average of the usual congregation. Some who were present were curious about the young preacher's ability, but, for the most part, the regular congregation had thought of him only as a raw local, and therefore an infliction to be patiently borne for one Sabbath. But such thoughts were scattered long before the service was over, and, as Joshua discoursed upon the 'Peace of God which passeth all understanding,' the balm that fell into his hearers' hearts silenced all criticism.

'Where has the young man learned this wisdom?' one and another asked themselves as they went home that morning, and not one but vowed to be present at the evening service.

As for Aaron Priestly, he was delighted beyond measure. Well, perhaps, that is scarcely the word, for his feeling was not so much one of exultation as of subdued confidence in God's

goodness. The balm had fallen into his heart, and he felt it an easy thing that morning to look up into God's face with calm joy.

'You have been a blessing to all who heard you this morning,' he said to Joshua at dinner-table.

'If so, I am thankful for it,' Joshua modestly replied: 'My one desire is to be made a blessing.'

'You ought to devote your life to this work.'

Joshua did not respond to this, but silently plied his knife and fork.

'What is your vocation?'

'I am following the plough.'

'Have you any thoughts of offering for the ministry?'

'None whatever.'

'Not! But have you considered it? Such talents as yours ought to be consecrated entirely to God's service. Don't you think so yourself?'

'I can never offer them,' said Joshua, 'but when God and the Church call me, I am ready.'

This answer pleased Aaron more than ever. It was another proof of the young man's humility, and Aaron there and then determined in his own mind to see that the way was opened out for his guest. He would see the superintendent on the morrow about it, and

put the case before him. Methodism should not lose such a promising young man for want of a word on his behalf. There was the making of a future President of the Conference in young Perry.

The evening service strengthened Aaron's decision. Only at anniversaries, and on very rare occasions, was Spaton chapel filled with listeners, but on that evening this wonderful thing happened. Those who had been at the morning service had spread the preacher's fame amongst their neighbours, and when Joshua ascended the pulpit to commence the evening service, not a seat was vacant in the spacious chapel. The sight gladdened Aaron's heart, while the hush of expectancy that fell upon the congregation as the young preacher rose to announce the opening hymn thrilled the steward through and through with holiest joy. And, as the service proceeded, this joy was deepened. From the very outset the preacher had caught the warm sympathy of his audience, and he held it from first to last with a firm but gentle grip. The sermon was a wonder and delight. Only two words in the text, but they at once appealed to every heart in the audience. 'Jesus Only' were the words, and, as Joshua, in a

quiet but intensely fervent voice, placed Jesus at the head of everything good in life,—art, literature, science, social reform, political economy, and religion—and insisted that all of worth in these things was entirely due to the influence of 'Jesus Only;' and, as towards the close of his discourse he pleaded with his audience to make 'Jesus Only' the head of all their affairs in life, and their guide and only hope, men who had never seen any beauty in the religion of Jesus Christ before, and scores of others who, up to that hour, had only taken a perfunctory interest in it, felt strangely moved to admiration, loftier purposes, and even to tears.

'The young man is a power,—a genius,' said Aaron next day to the superintendent minister.

'Exactly what I myself said at the local preachers' meeting when his name was put on trial.'

'We must secure him for God and Methodism. I should have much pleasure, in the March Quarterly Meeting, in supporting his candidature for the ministry.'

'And I shall be very happy to propose him. As I have said before, I have never met with a more promising young man.'

'He is a ploughman he tells me.'

'Yes.'

'What can we do for him in the way of education? I myself would be only too proud to pay for his schooling—.'

'No need whatever,' said the superintendent. 'Even a ploughman may have some knowledge of books, and, as you may gather from his preaching, he is not an illiterate,' and the minister smiled blandly.

'Still, his opportunities in life cannot have been many.'

'He is the best read man in Woodleigh. . . .'

'Which is not saying much,' laughed Aaron.

'And,' went on the superintendent leisurely, 'in the Spaton circuit.'

Aaron opened his eyes in astonishment. That was a big saying. Some of the young gents of Spaton were colleged men and crack scholars. Surely it was not possible that Joshua could be compared with these!

'Of course,' explained the superintendent, 'I refer to general reading. In any particular branch of study, Joshua Perry might not be able to excel; but, in his knowledge of books, I am convinced that no young man of his years in the circuit could equal him.'

'But as to his scholarship . . .?'

'The Woodleigh schoolmaster has him under his charge, and our good friend Jethro Hawley supplies him with plenty of reading.'

'I am delighted. That he is actually studying ——.

'Has been diligently for a year or more, and what he lacks a college career will supply.'

So Joshua was on the high road to an honourable success. But it was hardly to be expected that it could be secured without creating some little discord. The jealous-minded and the suspicious were disturbed. Under the leadership of the Spaton brother, who had first criticised Joshua's sermon at the local preachers' meeting, a small set seemed constantly to delight in scenting all Joshua's sermons as stolen ones. At one time it was Spurgeon he had filched from; at another it was one of Talmage's; then it was some other eminent divine; and, when there were no other living preachers available, then it was an old sermon unearthed from the Puritan Fathers. The most serious charge, however, was one brought against Joshua at his oral examination at the local preachers' meeting, and this, too, came from the Spaton brother.

'Well,' said the superintendent, having thoroughly tested Joshua in the presence of

all the brethren in all points of Methodist doctrine, 'what do you think, brethren?'

'No young man could possibly have passed a more creditable examination,' said the Bycombe minister. 'I am sure we ought all to be proud of him.'

'He will certainly be a credit to Methodism,' said the superintendent warmly, and the opinion was echoed by almost all present.

'There are just a few questions,' said the Spaton critic, rising to his feet, 'which I should like to put to the young brother before we finally pass him.'

'On doctrine?' queried the superintendent sharply, for he scented carping criticism.

'No, in regard to his sermons.'

A painful silence fell upon the brethren.

'You will remember,' said the critic, 'when the young man was brought on trial, I took the liberty of doubting whether he was preaching his own sermons, and now I have to renew that doubt before the brethren.'

'If it be a matter of opinion merely,' said the superintendent, with a brusqueness that was entirely foreign to his genial nature, 'we cannot go into it now. There have been twelve months of

trial to dispose of these doubts, and we can only now deal with specific charges.'

Quite undaunted and unabashed, the Spaton critic produced from his pocket the monthly part of the Homiletical Review.

'There is a sermon here,' he said, turning over the pages, 'which I think will make my charge sufficiently specific. . . . I suppose there is hardly a brother present who has not heard Joshua Perry preach his wonderful sermon on the "Peace of God which passeth all understanding." Well, let those judge who have heard it,' and the critic began to read out the sermon in the Homiletical Review.

It was indeed the same sermon that Joshua had preached, almost word for word!

Consternation sat upon the superintendent's brow, and the painful silence deepened. Not a man seemed able to move a muscle, and all sat with downcast faces, while the Spaton critic went on with his reading remorselessly, only pausing at intervals to watch the effect upon the brethren.

But at length the superintendent could bear it no longer.

'It is enough,' he said; 'We are convinced . . . But, in truth, I am grieved to have to confess it.

I was looking for great things from our young brother.'

Simeon Tandy had been sitting in his old attitude quietly listening, a curious expression on his face. But now he suddenly roused himself.

'What! Yo' say *we* be convinced, Mr Sooper?'

'What else can I say, Brother Tandy?'

'Yo' might qualify it a lil'l, an' say that us all be convinced '*xcept* Brother Tandy.'

'Why, what do you mean?'

'Ah mean this,' said Simeon, his eyes flashing, 'Ah mean t' say that Ah've confidence in th' honesty an' integrity o' oor young brother, an' Ah be soundly convinced that there be some explanation o' this matter.'

'What explanation can there be!' cried the superintendent in palpable distress, and one after another echoed the superintendent's despairing words.

'If Brother Tandy,' said the critic, 'will not accept this,' tapping the copy of the Homiletical Review with irritation, 'as proof positive, then I do not think any evidence will convince him.'

'No, we cannot get beyond it,' said the superintendent. 'But what can you suggest, Brother Tandy?'

'As to th' sermon, nothin'. Ah'm at as much loss as the rest o' th' brethren to account for't, but Ah've confidence in Joshua. Call un in, an' question un.'

But to this the brethren demurred. That would be too painful a thing. Far better that the chairman should talk to the young man privately, and point out to him the seriousness of his offence.

'Yes, I really think so,' said the superintendent, in agreement with these freely expressed opinions.

Simeon Tandy grew indignant.

'Well, brethren, Ah doant, an' Ah insist 'pon th' young man bein' heard. Doant yo' know, Ah'm responsible for Joshua's coomin' on th' plan? . . . Yo' all seem satisfied, but Ah'm not, an' Ah say, Call un in an' question un.'

'Come, come, Brother Tandy,' said the superintendent coaxingly, 'don't forget your usual discretion. We can very readily understand how much this unfortunate affair must affect you, but we cannot but accept the evidence of the facts.'

'But Ah doant, an' Ah'm goin' to bring oor young brother in,' and before the meeting had properly grasped his intention, Simeon had

opened the vestry door and was leading the culprit in.

'Joshua, lad,' he said, placing his hands affectionately upon the young man's shoulders, while the brethren all sat in amazement; 'yo' be charged wi' praichin' other men's sermons.'

A look of surprise, quickly followed by a look of pain, passed across Joshua's face. Then the superintendent took the matter in hand.

'Since we are forced to it, let us enquire into this thing as quietly and as kindly as possible. . . . Brother Perry, this is, as you will realise, a painful duty which is thrust upon me. . . . You are accused by Brother Harris of preaching another man's sermon; have you got anything to say in answer to the charge?'

'Only that it is perfectly untrue.'

'Didna Ah tell yo'!' cried Simeon Tandy delightedly.

'Brother Tandy, do try to calm yourself. . . . You deny the charge, Brother Perry?'

'Yes, totally.'

The superintendent looked both pained and perplexed. In the face of the evidence produced by the accuser he could not understand the denial.

'I do not want to prolong this affair,' he said with a catch in his voice, 'and, therefore, I may tell you at once, that Brother Harris brings a specific charge against you of preaching a sermon which you appear to have taken bodily out of the Homiletical Review.'

'Yes, word for word,' amplified the critic, rising with the open magazine in his hand.

A gleam of light shot from Joshua's eye, and strengthened Brother Tandy's assurance.

'The sermon in question,' pursued the superintendent, 'is one on the "Peace of God." You have preached on that subject?'

'Yes, all through the circuit.'

'Do you recognise this, then? . . . Brother Harris, just read out a few lines.'

Brother Harris did so.

'Are not those, Brother Perry, the very words used by you?'

'Yes.'

Brother Harris read another paragraph.

'And those?' asked the superintendent.

'Yes.'

'Then your sermon and this are identical?'

'I believe it will be found so from first word to last.'

That was a candid confession, and the only

thing required to condemn him. Every face in the room betrayed its painful surprise.

'Then you did preach another man's sermon?'

'No——.'

'Brother Perry! In the face of what you have just heard!'

'May I ask what is the date of that magazine?'

'This month's, December,' glibly answered the critic.

'I first preached my sermon,' said Joshua quietly, 'in July of this year.'

The words made a rift in the clouds, but still the brethren looked puzzled. Not even Simeon Tandy expected what was coming.

'I am sorry,' Joshua continued slowly, 'that the brethren should have considered me guilty of so mean an action, one of which I could never be guilty. . . . That sermon in the Homiletical Review is my own sermon. . . .'

'Your own!' gasped several of the brethren.

'Yes; if Brother Harris will look at the initials at the end——.'

The superintendent almost snatched the magazine from Brother Harris's hands in his eagerness to see the initials.

'J. P.,' he said aloud. 'Thank God! Thank God!'

'Didna Ah tell yo'!' cried Simeon, the tears in his eyes.

'The editor of the Review asked me to let him publish the sermon. Mr Priestly, I believe, had told him of it.'

So the mystery was explained, and all criticism silenced. Even Brother Harris was satisfied. But he made a last attempt to justify his action.

'My error was but a natural one,' he began, when the superintendent cut him short.

'The question is, brethren, those who are in favour of Brother Joshua Perry coming on full plan?'

In a twinkling every hand in the room shot up. Then an unusual thing happened; the staid decorum of the brethren broke down utterly, and the superintendent's soul was shocked by the sudden sound of a brisk hand-clapping.

And that was the way Joshua Perry passed his examination.

Ned
Thornbury's
Love
Story

Note to the Reader

When this story was first published serially, a friendly critic, in a letter to the Editor of the Methodist Times, expressed his surprise that so old a woman as Mrs Thornbury should have so young a son, and dubbed her a modern Sarah. But there was a difference of more than thirty years in the respective ages of the two women when their sons were born, and the critic's comparison, therefore, an exaggerated one. In case any other reader should be similarly critical, it may be as well here to say that the ages given in the story are substantially true, and the matter was one of general comment in Woodleigh. Besides, medical students — and many others — know that, though such births may be rare, well-authenticated cases on record prove them not impossible.

NED THORNBURY'S LOVE STORY

I

A DAUGHTER OF THE PHILISTINES

ONE of the most remarkable things in Woodleigh was the persistency of the Thornbury family type. Seven generations of the Thornburys had lived and died in the smithy-house, and Cleeve Churchyard contained all the family tombs. Over two hundred years had passed away since the first Thornburys had settled in Woodleigh. Ever since the Stuarts were on the English throne, the Thornbury hammers had rung out without pause or intermission (Sundays excepted) on the smithy anvil there, so that the family had long since become an integral part of the village life; and it had also become impossible to think of Woodleigh without at the same time thinking of the Thornburys, and to

have in the mind's eye the picture of the low-roofed, small-windowed, ivy-clad, ramshackle old house, and the roaring forge next door in which the Thornburys toiled. A little iron gate (the work of some ancestral Thornbury) opens on to a flagged pathway which leads through the front garden up to the dark-green painted door, round the porch of which red roses grow and the convolvulus and virginia creeper twine. The house is one of the sights of Woodleigh, and though, of course, unpretentious in appearance, yet, for the lover of old English homesteads, is full of interest. If you should go to Woodleigh, though a perfect stranger there, you cannot miss the house, for it stands at the entrance to the village on the Spaton road, just where it joins the Monksford highway. Moreover, its position is central; a hop, skip, and a jump from it will land you on to the steps of the Methodist Chapel, while the Board School lies but a stone's throw away.

Old Martha Thornbury was the tenant of the house when I knew it. Her husband had died twenty years before, but she still held feebly on to life, though in her ninetieth year. Her two sons, Tom and Ned, carried on the business of the smithy; while her only daughter, Janet,

managed the domestic affairs of the family. These four made up the whole household at that time, but Death had made great gaps in it in the years that were sped, so that now a great disparity existed in the separate ages of the surviving children. Tom, the eldest then living, was a man bordering on to the sixties; while Janet, who stood next in order, was his junior by more than twenty years, and Ned a vigorous man not yet in his prime.

Not one of the three had ever married, and it really seemed as if the oldest family in Woodleigh was at last in its decay. People often commented upon the circumstance, and old heads shook sadly to think that soon there might be strangers in the old smithy-house. Why Tom had never married no one knew, and now that the chances of his ever raising a family were past, no one cared to ask. Janet's reasons were better understood. Every one in the village knew that Janet had once loved, and was herself loved; some even believed that the old love still existed on both sides, and that the man, who had abruptly forsaken her to marry Jeremiah Seaton's bewitching daughter, had dearly rued it ever since. He had married her, he had said, for her soul's sake. A vivacious

and giddy young girl of her temperament might possibly go down to perdition if some restraining influence were not thrown round her, and so he had joined her to himself in holy wedlock. The sequel, as every Woodleighite knows, proved lamentably disastrous. But that is another story.

The hopes of the village were, therefore, centred in Ned. If the Thornbury family were not to die out, Ned must marry. But Ned made no sign, and it really seemed as if he were following in his brother's celibate steps. And, though the subject was often mentioned to him by those anxious for the perpetuation of the Thornbury family in Woodleigh, it was all to no purpose. Ned only laughed at them, and treated the matter as a good joke.

'Ah should be loth,' his mother would say to him at times, 'to think that th' old homestead be goin' to pass out o' th' family.'

'What matter who has it, mother,' Ned would answer almost flippantly, 'when us be all in oor graves?'

'Ah should rest quieter there,' she would answer, 'if Ah knowed yo'r childer wur growin' oop to tak' yo'r plaäce in th' smithy.'

And then Ned would break out into one of his hearty laughs, and run off to his anvil again.

At other times his mother would try another move. Perhaps she would be seated in her wicker chair at the door in the sun, and Ned, relieved a little from the hot work of the smithy, tending his roses in the front garden. Ned was a great lover of roses, and grew them for the flower shows, while far and near he was reckoned the most skilful hand at budding and grafting known.

'Eh! Ned,' his mother would sigh, 'who be goin' to 'tend th' roses when yo' be gone?'

He knew very well what she meant at these times, but still would try to evade her meaning.

'Ah'm not goin' anywhere, mother,' he would reply with an innocent air.

'Wouldna it grieve yo' to think o' 'em bein neglected?'

The question was one to touch a soft part in his nature. He would pause awhile and look sadly round upon his treasures.

'Yes, Ah b'lieve Ah'd fret orful, mother.' But then he would immediately answer more cheerily 'But us needn't fear, mother. There ull allus be those livin' what ull tend 'em for their own sweet sakes.'

Then for a while the two would fence the question,—she not wishing to state it in so many

words, lest she might turn him from it altogether; and he striving by every possible evasion to keep her from openly mentioning it.

At last she would throw herself on his pity.

'Ned, yo' know well' nough what Ah do mean.'

'Ah do, mother,' he would frankly confess, 'but Ah doant want to talk about it. . . . Ah'll never leave yo', mother, for ony other woman so long as yo' do live,' and, with the word, he would pin a rich rose in her faded dress, driving the head of the pin home with the corner of his leathern apron.

'Who ull plant th' flowers on yo'r mother's grave, Ned?'

'Who but his mother's son!'

'Na, but it ud be less lonesome lyin' out in th' cold churchyard there, if Ah could hear th' pat o' childer's feet aboöve m'head.'

And at that Ned would grow severely practical, and tell his mother that she hud strange fancies, none of which she well knew could possibly be realised in the grave.

Thus things went on for years. But they could not always so continue. Few men pass through life without being caught in the wiles of some fair charmer, and the inevitable happened in turn to Ned Thornbury. But then his mother's views

changed. The girl who had won his love was a fresh import into Woodleigh, the new dairymaid at the Oakeys, and no one in the village knew anything of her past. She was beautiful certainly, as beautiful as a picture, and as fair-looking as a June rose; but the face, so said Mrs Thornbury, was not always a true index of the character, and oftentimes the most beautiful faces but cloaked the blackest of characters.

Worse than all, the girl was not a Methodist.

'But what o' that, mother?' Ned urged, 'Baint there ony good foak in th' worl' besides Methodists?'

'Mebbe,' was Mrs Thornbury's reluctant admission, but said in such a way as to imply that she had grave doubts about it.

'Mebbe! Coom, mother, yo' must sure-*ly* know there be!'

'Ah know,' she answered impressively, 'that there can be no happiness in th' home when th' husband be o' one persuasion an' th' wife o' anoöther. . . . Ah've knowed 'em, too, what ha' left th' church o' their fathers for th' sake o' a woman,' and the old lady shook her head despairingly.

'But sure-*ly* yo' doant think Ah ud be guilty o' such a thing, mother?'

'Ah dunno, Ah dunno. Ah pray God not . . . But there be no knowin' what yo' might do if yo' wur brought t' it.'

Ned was pained, and was turning away in sorrow, when she caught him by the arm, and gently detained him.

'Ah'm yo'r pore old mother, Ned, an' Ah'm on'y speakin' out o' love for yo', and for yo'r good. . . . Doant yo' think yo'r mother has yo'r welfare at heart more'n onyone? What else ha' Ah got to live for now? Marry on'y in th' Lord, my son; that be th' command, an' yo'r mother ud add to it, Choose on'y from 'mongst yo'r own people.'

But Ned was not appeased. He loved his mother dearly, and he was one of the few men who can honestly say they never did a single thing to grieve their mother. Not only his conscience, but all who knew Ned could bear witness to it. Now however, he felt as if he were being driven to cross her, and it cut him to the quick. And he also felt that there ought to have been no necessity for it. She was over-anxious for his sake, and her peculiar views belonged to another generation from the one in which they lived. The world had gone past such narrowness, and had left his mother

stranded in its old-time bigotry. Besides, he had already ventured to declare his love to the pretty dairymaid, and he could not now go to her, he a man in his third decade, and say, 'Let us think no more about what we have agreed upon. You are not a Methodist, and my mother objects to you.' Such an act would be both wicked and foolish. Nor could he do it if he tried. His heart had gone out towards Selina Martin, and he could not thus wantonly recall it. But it troubled him sorely to think he was in opposition to his mother's wishes, and, under any other circumstances, he would have parted with his right hand rather than such a thing should be.

He was in a fix, and, for a whole day, he went in and out of the house as a man bearing a great burden. But love made him a strategist. He would place his case in abler hands than his own, and trust to another's advocacy. His plan was first to enlist Janet's sympathy, and then to leave it to her to win his mother's approval and blessing. Women could do these things so much better than men, and knew better the shortest way to the heart. And, though Janet secretly sympathised with her mother's views, yet for Ned's sake she undertook the commission.

'Why, mother,' she said, when they two were left alone together in the house shortly afterwards, 'Ned's marriage be just th' thing yo've so long greatly desired, an' Ah think yo' do wrong in now opposin' it.' (Janet always spoke the plain vernacular at home, though abroad she affected a more polished style.)

The old lady sadly shook her head.

'Yo' know yo'r old mother better'n that, Janet,' she said. 'Yo' know it baint 'cause Ned be thinkin' o' weddin', but that it be on'y 'gainst th' lass un ha' picked oop wi' that Ah'm grievin'.'

'Well, what do yo' know o' her?'

'Nothin'; but her baint a Methodist.'

'Ned loves her, an' ull never marry ony other woman.'

'Ned ull never marry her wi' his mother's consent.'

'Tut, mother; doant say that. Besides, yo' d' know, Selina Martin does coom to oor chapel on times.'

'Her on'y cooms after Ned, th' brazen hussy!'

'Now, mother, yo' be growin' unjust, an' that baint like yo'. It be Ned what goes after her, an' her on'y cooms to chapel when he do bring her.'

'If so be that her wur soundly an' savingly

convarted, Ah wouldna say onything 'gainst it.'

'An' how do yo' know her baint?'

'Hers never bin to th' penitent form.'

'God ha' more ways o' savin' foak than at th' penitent form.'

'Her doant meet in class.'

'No more do thousands o' other good Christian people.'

'Her never stays to th' Sabbath evenin' prayer-meetin'.'

That was a staggerer for Janet. She was too good a Methodist to pass lightly over such an omission in any one. That people seriously religious should walk out of chapel so soon as the benediction following the preaching service was pronounced, and not stay to pray for the salvation of precious souls, was a thing even Janet could not reconcile with their profession. Nothing ever tempted *her* to forsake the prayer-meeting. Nay, no temptation could possibly affect her; on this point she was invulnerable. Ever since she was a girl in pinafores she had been accustomed 'to remain behind for prayer' after the close of the evening service, and to have neglected this sacred ordinance she would have counted sin. But she was pleading Ned's

cause now, and, much to her own heart-searching and discomfort, found herself framing excuses for Selina's conduct, which, under other circumstances, Janet would never have dreamt of doing.

'Selina Martin may not ha' bin brought oop to such things, mother,' she said after a pause, 'as th' Sabbath evenin' prayer meetin'.'

'That doant matter. Her be big 'nough to know what be right. What does th' Word say, "By their fruit yo' shall know 'em?"'

At every point Janet's pleading was foiled, and she was obliged to abandon the subject a while. But not for long, and, at the first opportunity, she took it up again.

'If th' old home baint to pass into th' hands o' strangers, mother, Ned must marry. Tom be past it now, an' us ha' on'y got Ned to look to.'

Mrs Thornbury did not answer. Janet was probing her at a sore point.

'Ah can't 'bide th' thought,' Janet went on, 'no more'n yo'rsel', mother, o' th' dear, old plaäce in which so many generations o' oor ancestors ha' lived, passin' from us alt'gether. Think o' it, mother, for ower two hundred years, God's blessin' ha' rested 'pon oor family, an'

what ha' us done that He should remove it now?'

Still her venerable mother sat silent. Her eyes wore a far-off gaze.

'It be like 'sif a curse wur a'coomin' on us, mother, 'an' 'sif God wur sore displeased wi us,' and Janet paused impressively.

But still her mother sat motionless and speechless.

'Us be all God's childer, whether Methodists or not . . . childer coom afore sects, mother, an' baint it reasonable to 'spose th' Heavenly Father loves all ekally th' same? He ha' no favour*ites*, an' doant Bible tell us that He be no respecter 'o persons? Some serve Him in one way, an' some in anoöther . . . an' for my part, Ah'm tryin' ev'ry day what Ah do live t'think o' th' whole o' th' human race as one family.'

Janet ceased. For a little space longer Mrs Thornbury sat silent, but then answered sadly,

'But e'en in families, Janet, all th' childer be not good an' th' saved o' th' Lord.'

'No, mother, but all may be,' Janet quickly replied,' whatever creed 'em do profess. . . . An' Ah'm not doubtin' but what Selina Martin be a child o' God.'

Mrs Thornbury offered no further opposition,

but she was unconvinced. She shook her head sorrowfully, and sighed heavily.

'Coom, mother,' said Janet at last, 'just mak' pore Ned happy by sayin' yo'll give un yo'r blessin'.'

But it was only after repeated coaxings that Janet got an answer. But the answer was final, and it put an end, for that night, to further conversation upon the vexed subject.

'Janet, girl, do yo' want to bring down m' grey hairs in sorrow to th' grave?'

* * * * *

In the dead of that night Janet was disturbed by the sounds of her mother's voice, as if she were talking in her sleep. It was no new thing for Janet to be thus disturbed, to rise several times in the night, and to go and listen at her mother's door to satisfy herself that all was well, and now she hastily got out of bed, and stole on tip-toe to the door of her mother's room. There she stood awhile, breathlessly listening.

Her mother was awake and praying, and the prayer wrung Janet's heart.

'Lord, show un his folly. He be but a child yet, and easily led astray. . . . Suffer un not to marry a daughter o' th' Philistines, an' thus bring down Thy righteous wrath an' indignation

'pon his head. . . . He be th' child o' many prayers, Lord, an' th' son o' Thy handmaiden, th' brittle thread o' whose unworthy life Thou hast lengthened out so long. . . . Keep un, Lord, an' let un on'y choose a pardner from 'mongst his own people . . . . from 'mongst Thy dear childer whose hearts ha' bin washed in th' blood o' th' Lamb.'

Janet stole back to her bed with a surging heart. Early next morning she sought out Ned, and threw up her brief.

'Ah can't plead for yo', dear Ned, ony longer,' she said, with the tears in her eyes, 'Ah really can't. Much as Ah love yo', Ned, Ah love dear mother more, an' Ah can't go to cross her ony longer. . . . It be breakin' her heart, Ned; it be breakin' her heart.'

Ned suffered the word in silence. His face was fearfully set and pale. Then, just pressing Janet's hand a moment in his, as if to show her that he understood her thoroughly, he turned on his heel and went into the smithy.

II

A JUNE MORNING IDYLL

THERE was a jangling of milk-cans on the still morning air, and, presently, Selina Martin came out from Farmer Oakey's farmyard with two large empty cans depending from a yoke which rested across her shoulders, and took her way down the short lane which leads to the meadow where the farmer's kine were grazing. As she went along she was singing merrily, while the complete abandon of her whole manner showed how very much she revelled in the pure enjoyment of the life she was living.

There was a stile at the end of the lane, and a five-barred gate near it, through which the lowing kine were usually driven when taken to the byres. The gate was kept fastened to prevent mishap, and only opened upon necessity. Ordinary mortals, therefore, crossed the stile if business or pleasure led them through the meadow. Not so Selina Martin. Such a way was too prosaic for her young spirits, and her

morning habit was, first, to deposit her cans on the other side of the gate by standing on the bottom bar and leaning over it, and then herself to go flying over the gate at a running leap. Of course in the early morning, and as one of the earliest risers in the village, she was free from curious observation. Once, indeed, she caught sight of a man in a distant field as she was in mid-air, and she immediately smoothened down her dress with a demure face, and went on her way sobered. Ordinarily, however, she was as full of life as the maddest, merriest child, and would chase the scurrying rabbits across the meadow, herself running like a March hare the while, and laughing joyously at the sight of their white tails bobbing in front of her. At other times she would mimic the morning song-birds with such surprising fidelity that the ear of any one who had chanced to pass that way might have been easily deceived, while the baa-ing of the sheep, the bleating of the lambs, or the lowing of the cattle were sounds which she imitated to perfection.

This was the girl with whom Ned Thornbury had fallen in love, and it can hardly be a cause of surprise that so staunch and old-time a Methodist as his mother should have felt her

puritanical instincts shocked at the bare thought of such an alliance.

In the middle of the meadow, Selina stopped and deposited her milk-cans. Then she began to call the cattle, and her cheery, 'Pop! pop! pop! pop!' rang out musically on the still, balmy morning air.

At the first sound of her familiar voice, the quietly-grazing kine on the other side of the field pricked up their ears, raised their heads to look, and, seeing their young mistress standing there in the sunlight, whisked their tails in plain delight.

'Pop! pop! pop! pop!' again went Selina's pleasing call over the meadow, and this time the kine in answer came ambling towards her, lowing all the while and whisking their tails.

A charming Alderney came first, and Selina approached it gaily.

'Now, m'beauty,' she said, giving it a hearty slap on the flank, 'stan' still yo' an' us ull get to work.'

The cow was a docile creature, with great, liquid eyes, and obeyed instantly. Thereupon Selina fixed her three-legged stool in position, and at once began the milking; and for the next few minutes nothing could be heard save the steady swish-swish of the warm milk as it streamed into

the pail, the singing of the lark high in the heavens, or the impatient lowing of the cattle to be milked.

Soon the comely Alderney was finished, and dismissed with a slap and a good-natured,

'Now off yo' go, Alderney!'

Next Selina planted her stool by the side of a magnificent creature, a finely speckled cow, the pet of the farm, and sat down to milk her.

As she did so a man crossed the stile at the bottom of the field, and came leisurely across the meadow towards Selina. She was sitting with her back towards him, and therefore did not notice him, while the mooing of the encircling cattle that awaited their turns to be milked prevented her from hearing his approach.

It was Ned Thornbury. His face was full of grief and his head downcast. He had not seen Selina to speak to for two whole days, and, during that time, he had endured untold agonies. Janet's helplessness to do anything for him with his mother had weighed heavily upon his spirits, while his mother's stubborn refusal to countenance his marriage with an 'alien' had crushed him to the earth. No doubt had Ned been nurtured in the broader life of the city he would have been less inclined to put so much stress on

his mother's objections, but his days had been spent in rustic simplicity, a state in which men think more reverently of the opinions of their forbears, and count their words as almost divine. And, though Ned Thornbury was then in his vigorous manhood, he would no more have thought of questioning his mother's words than of doing a great wrong. Nay, he would have felt it sin to do so. Still more, though he had gently debated with his mother the reasonableness of the step he had taken, it never entered into his head to set up his own wisdom in the matter as superior to hers. Her merest wish to him had always been law, and now he bowed to it with childlike submission. Courageous enough under other circumstances and strong, in his mother's hands he was as gentle as a lamb.

Ned had gone into the fields that morning for the purpose of laying the whole trend of matters before Selina. Yet how he was going to do it he did not know; indeed, it puzzled him to think what he *could* say. He did not want to go against his mother's wishes, yet he was loth to give Selina up. The only fixed thought in his mind was to see and speak with Selina. All his other thoughts were shapeless and undefinable, though the idea of throwing himself upon Selina's

goodness and consideration, so as to end all that had begun between them, or, at least, of postponing the consummation of it, was beginning to take form in his brain. On the whole, however, his attitude was that of a man drifting on a sea of circumstance, and waiting and watching eagerly for something at which to clutch.

He drew nearer with beating heart. Busily intent upon her work, she still sat all unconscious of his approach, while the rich, warm milk continued to stream steadily into the pail. Now that he was drawing so near to her, the little courage left in his heart was forsaking him. How could he give her up? He felt his heart leap with great joy at the mere sight of her, and he suddenly became conscious of the fact that nothing in life, not even his glorious show of roses, had ever before seemed half so lovely to him as that of her slim figure sitting there in the morning sunlight milking the cow. The lily was not so fair and graceful to him as the vision of Selina in her cotton bonnet and print dress, with her sleeves rolled up to the elbows and her plump arms showing.

He drew still nearer to her, and had now come to within a few steps from where she was sitting, still unconscious of his presence in the

meadow. Then he paused a moment, and feasted his eyes upon her fair form, his heart swelling with pride of her. As he stood there gazing, the strength of his manhood rose within him, and dispelled all his craven fears and filial misgivings. Then a playful humour thrilled him. He stole quietly up behind her—stooped —took her face in his hands from behind—gently turned her head, and kissed her passionately on the forehead, before she was scarcely aware of what was happening.

The moment he released her, she sprang suddenly to her feet, almost upsetting the milk-pail in her confusion. Her face was all aflame, and red as June roses; but plainly not with anger, as the love-light in her eyes showed.

'How dare yo!' she exclaimed with an air of offence, but, at the same time, with some confusion.

'It be on'y me,' said Ned, with the excitement of his rashness still in his eyes. 'Ah really couldna help it. Ah declare to yo' that Ah never did see a prettier sight in m'life than yo' looked sittin' there. . . . Ah wur just thinkin' that if yon picture man wur to coom 'long again wi' his camera, him as took th'

smithy, Ah'd get him to draw yo' sittin' there milking th' speckled cow.'

Selina's colour deepened, and her eyes flashed with pure gladness. Still she kept up the feint she was practising. It is a maiden's way so to do.

'An' where should Ah be to let yo'?' . . . .

'Ah should think, Ned, yo' wanted for summat better to do to coom unbeknown behind a body like that,' and, as she spoke, she kept trying to push her disarranged and wayward hair under cover of her cotton bonnet.

'Nay, Selina, yo' be wrong there. Nothin' could be better.'

She laughed a little, low, merry laugh. But still she feigned.

'It ud fit yo' better at this time o' mornin' to go an' 'tend to th' smithy fires i'stead o' coomin' out here wi' yo'r capers, an' hinderin' a body from doin' their work.'

'There be other fires than those o' th' smithy, Selina, what want 'tendin' sometimes,' he answered promptly. Slow of speech at other times, love seemed loosening his tongue.

She caught his meaning in an instant, but glanced swiftly into his face as if to assure herself of it.

'So yo' think so, d' yo'? Then, where ha' yo' bin all these days that yo' didna 'tend to 'em?'

'These two days on'y,' Ned quickly corrected, looking straight into her mischievous eyes, which just then were sparklingly bright. 'Did th' time seem longer to yo', Selina?'

Again she caught his meaning, and drew herself up with an attempt at indifference.

'No, not longer than other days,' she said carelessly.

Ned drew nearer to her and took her hand in his. She made no attempt to withdraw it.

''Em ha' bin like years to me, Selina,' he said with painful emphasis, and his face wore a look of agony.

She did not speak, but a quivering went through her whole frame as she hearkened.

'D' yo' know why Ah've stayed away, Selina?'

'Mebbe 'cause yo' ha' bin busy.'

'No more'n t'other days, Selina.'

'Mebbe, then,' and she could not refrain from a little bantering, ''cause yo' ha' grown tired o' me.'

'Selina!'

'Well, a man can't allus be tied to a maid's apron-strings.'

'Ah could never grow tired o' yo'r sweet company, Selina.'

'Ah doant know,' she said provokingly.

'Ah declare it to yo' solemnly.'

'Then what wur it? Ah'm sure Ah doant know o' ought else.'

'It wur——'cause——.'

But that now that Ned was put to it, he hardly knew how to frame it into words. He hesitated and stammered painfully.

''Cause what?' she urged with just a trace of anxious interest betraying in her tone.

''Cause Ah wur in trouble,' was all Ned could say.

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than her countenance changed. In a moment she dropped her coquettish manner. Feint and pretence were instantly gone, and pure womanly love and sympathy looked out of her eyes.

'That baint tellin' me much, Ned,' she said, with increased anxiousness.

'No,' he answered after a pause, 'an' Ah doant know what Ah wur doin' o' to tell yo' that much, botherin' yo'r head wi' my troubles. It wur nothin' after all. . . . Besides, Ah've done wi't. Ah'll never let it trouble me no more.'

He did not deceive her by such words. A

woman's love can see through the thin veil of man's considerate pretence.

'What wur it?' she asked.

'Oh, nothin', nothin'.'

'Wur it 'cause o' me?'

'Doant ask me, Selina,' he replied, which was as palpable a confession to her as if he had told her all. Still, she saw that he was deeply stirred, and respected his feeling.

'Ah won't if yo' doant wish me, Ned, but as yo' ha' told me so much yo' oughter tell me all th' rest.'

'No, Ah canna; Ah canna.'

'Very well, Ned, good mornin'!' and Selina moved to set her milk-pails in proper position for hooking on to the yoke. But Ned was too quick for her. Nimbly stepping forward he took the yoke from her, and placed it upon his own broad shoulders.

'Yo' baint angry?' he asked with misgiving.

'No, but Ah must be goin'.'

'Then Ah'm coomin' wi' you, and Ah'll carry th' pails for yo' as far as th' smithy,' he answered with glad relief, raising the pails as he spoke with the ease of a strong man.

'No, not so far as that,' she entreated; 'yo' can just help me ower th' stile yon wi' 'em.'

'Ah'm goin' to carry 'em as far as the smithy, Ah d' tell yo',' Ned replied doggedly. 'What ha' yo' got t' say 'gainst it?'

'Some 'un 'ull see yo'.'

'D' yo' mind that?'

'Nay, Ah doant mind, but Ah thought that mebbe *yo'* wouldna like it.'

'For why?'

'For fear some one ud see yo'.'

'Let 'em,' said Ned firmly; 'what do Ah care? . . . Mebbe 'em ull see summat else, too.'

'What?'

'That Ah baint the babby 'em think me, an that Ah've a mind o' my own.'

And Selina thought she had never heard him speak with so much recklessness or decision before.

III

OTHER SHEEP OF THE FOLD

THUS began Ned Thornbury's revolt against his aged mother's prejudices. But it was only the beginning. As yet he was by no means master of himself, and his conduct was tempered with remorse so soon as he was again alone. While Selina was near him, and he was nerved directly by her influence, he was as strong as other men, but, apart from her, he was weaker than water ; and, over his anvil that morning, he was already devising schemes for once more attempting to reconcile his mother to his views.

The earliest result of this scheming was a visit of Ellen Tarling to the smithy-house.

'Ah've scarcely a moment to stay,' she said, as she came bustling in. 'Thomas ha' gone ower to Monksford, an' Ah thought Ah'd just tak' th' chance o' callin' 'pon yo'. How be yo' all this mornin'?'

'Ah'm no diff'rent than usual,' answered Mrs

Thornbury, in her peculiar, slow way of speaking. 'Won't yo' sit down a minute?'

'Well, just a minute,' and Ellen Tarling took the proffered seat.

'Ah'm a won'er to mysel', Ellen,' said the aged woman.

'An' to ev'rybody else. Bless me! yo'll live to see many a bright day yet.'

Mrs Thornbury did not answer. It was a prophecy to which she dared not consent. Human life at best hung only by a brittle thread, and hers was so near to the snapping. She sat silent, as was her wont through the infirmity of years, feebly trembling all over.

Presently Janet came in from the garden with an apron full of early peas just gathered. She opened the apron to show them to her mother. 'Early Sunrise,' she said in an aside to Mrs Tarling.

Mrs Tarling tried one or two of the pods between her fingers.

''Em be well filled,' she observed critically.

'Yes, splendid,' said Janet.

'Yo' hanna been long in gatherin' 'em, Janet, said her mother.

'No; Selina Martin happened to coom into th' garden, an' her helped me to pick 'em.'

'What a real good girl that is, to be sure!' said Mrs Tarling, readily seizing the chance afforded her.

Neither Janet or her mother answered. The old woman's face had instantly assumed a hard, unsympathetic look, and Janet appeared no little 'put about.'

'John Oakey wur sayin' as how her be worth her weight in goold. Ah s'pose un never had such a girl about th' plaäce afore.'

'Indeed!' said Janet by way of courtesy, but glanced uneasily at her mother. The old lady sat unmoved.

'As a maker o' good butter, John Oakey d' say that there be none ekal to her in th' whole neighbourhood.'

Still Mrs Thornbury remained hard-looking and unmoved.

'Ha' yo' heard o' Selina's kindness to Hannah Perry? Her ha' never missed a single day sin' Hannah took to her bed o' goin' in an' tidyin' oop a bit.

'T'other night her went ower to th' cottage after had set th' milk in th' dairy an' had done a hard day's work, and cleaned the plaäce down from top to bottom. That be what Ah call pure religion an' undefiled. . . . Her be be-

coomin' a blessin' to the village, an' her be makin' hersel' beloved by all.'

Shortly after this Mrs Tarling took her departure. Her mission, she considered, was finished for the present. She had spoken well of a deserving girl, and she ardently hoped, for Ned's sake, that the seed sown would bear fruit.

Ned came in from the smithy shortly after Mrs Tarling had gone, and busied himself about something in the house. Yet it was as plain as a pike-staff that he had no particular business indoors, and that there was an unrevealed purpose in his presence there. The truth was that he had come to find out what effect Mrs Tarling's visit had produced. But no inkling was given him. Neither Janet or his mother so much as referred to the subject, and it seemed to him as if each studiously avoided it. He went back to his work somewhat cast down, but not utterly so. He had not placed his whole hope in Ellen Tarling.

During the next day, John Oakey looked in at the smithy-house.

'Janet,' he said, 'us do want yo' to tak' a table at th' tea-meetin' next Tuesday in th' schoolroom. Yo'll oblige th' Trustees?'

Janet glanced at her mother. Could she venture to leave her so long alone?

'Yes, go, Janet,' said her mother, interpreting her look; 'a bit o' change ull do yo' a worl' o' good. . . . Young foak,' turning to the farmer, 'be so apt to grow mopish if left wi' th' old uns all th' time. 'Em want to get out a bit to 'liven 'em.'

Janet laughed merrily.

'Mother ull never ha' it that Ah'm onything but a girl yet.'

'An' yo'll allus be th' same to her, Ah s'pose, to th' end o' th' chapter,' said John Oakey.

'Who be takin' tables, John?' asked Janet presently.

'Ellen Tarling, Mary Pryce, yo', an' oor Selina,—fower o' yo' alt'gether.'

Mrs Thornbury raised her head.

'Who?' she asked.

'Oor Selina,' answered the farmer, knowing well what she wanted.

'An' who be her?'

'Selina Martin, oor dairymaid.'

A shade of annoyance passed across Mrs Thornbury's face.

'Ah'm downright surprised at yo', John Oakey,'

she said, after an ominous pause, 'an' her not a Methodist!'

'Her be none th' worse for that, Martha.'

Mrs Thornbury looked pained.

'It baint th' "isms" what God cares so much about, Martha, but goodness. That be th' chief thing in th' A'mighty's sight, Martha, depend on't, an' aboöve ev'rything else. An' if there be onyone in this village wi' a better heart an' kinder than Selina Martin, Ah don't know un.'

Ultimately Janet promised to take the table, and John Oakey shortly afterwards bade them good-day.

Then, for a long time, old Mrs Thornbury sat silent, sad-looking, and thoughtful. Janet did not disturb her, but went quietly about her domestic duties. For an hour or more no word was spoken between them. Janet's heart was full, but she had determined not to vex her mother again with Ned's love affairs, and, though she knew that this was the one thing then filling her mother's mind, she would not be the first to broach the subject. When her mother spoke, it would be time enough then for her to say what was in her heart.

But the hours passed and her mother gave no sign. At length dinner-time brought the men

home for their mid-day meal, and the silence was broken by general conversation upon all sorts of topics. But, of the subject uppermost in all their minds, no word was spoken.

Not until nightfall did the fire slumbering within burst forth. Janet was upstairs in one of the bedrooms when she fancied she heard the sounds of voices below. She gently opened the door and listened.

Ned and her mother were holding an animated conversation downstairs. Janet listened eagerly, and was glad to note that there was no trace of anger in either of the loved voices. Mrs Thornbury was talking sorrowfully, as if in great trouble, and with the tone of one pleading to avert a threatened calamity. Ned's voice was subdued and reverent. But there was an unusual firmness in his tone such as Janet had never before heard him use when in conversation with his mother.

Janet's sympathy was stirred. To play the listener was a thing abhorrent to her at any time, but her heart was aching for the two downstairs, and, for the life of her, she could not withdraw from the position she had taken up.

'Mother, Ah'm not a babby,' Ned was say-

ing, 'an' Ah can sure-*ly* be trusted to choose for mysel' in this matter. . . . Besides, would yo' ha' me do onything dishonourable?'

'No Thornbury ever did that yet.'

'Well, Ah've pledged m' troth to Selina, an' Ah can do no other than wed her now.'

'If her wur on'y a child o' God——'

'Why do yo' keep on repeatin' that, mother? Doant yo' know it do give me pain?'

'Ah'll admit Selina ha' never bin to th' penitent form so far as Ah do know, an' that her doant meet in class, but Ah won't hear ony one say her be not a child o' God. . . . She be a child o' God as much as onyone else, Ah know.'

'By creation, yo' mean?'

'Aye, an' by redemption.'

'But sure-*ly* not by adoption?'

Ned did not immediately answer, and a long and solemn pause ensued. Then he spoke bitterly:

'Ah doant know, an' Ah never asked her. An' what be more, Ah'm not goin' to ask her. For why? 'Cause Ah judge foak by their lives, an' Ah tell yo', mother, in all reverence an' solemnity, that if God wur such as some foak say He be . . . if He wur such as could

turn His back 'pon so unselfish an' glad a creature as Selina, just 'cause her doant meet in class, or 'cause her hadna fallen in wi' all th' forms an' ceremonies o' th' Church, He ud never . . . be my God a moment longer.'

Such bold and fearful words had never been spoken in the smithy-house before, and they were followed by a dread, oppressive silence. Janet, now leaning over the banisters listening with beating heart, felt them to strike a chill through her blood, and a great awe fell upon her spirits. As for Mrs Thornbury, the words sounded to her as little short of blasphemy, though her mother's heart knew well that they had been spoken more in anguish than passion. Yet they stilled her tongue and almost hushed the beating of her heart, while, for a full minute, no sound relieved the oppressive silence save that of the solemn ticking of the wag-at-the-wall clock.

And then Ned broke the silence once more.

'Mother,' he said, tenderly this time, and Janet could picture his arms thrown round his mother's neck, 'it baint creed an' all that what do please th' A'mighty, but just simple goodness o' heart. . . . When He sees that in

onyone, no matter whether he be a chapel man or a wild heathen, He be well pleased.

'But th' blood, yo' say? . . . Well, Ah can't 'xplain it, but Ah'll never b'lieve that God be so narrow as men ud mak' Him. . . . What do th' old Book say, mother? Baint He "A God full o' compassion, an' gracious, long-sufferin', an' plenteous in mercy an' truth?" . . . That be my God, mother, an' Ah can safely trust Selina in th' hands o' such a God whatever men an' th' worl' do say.'

Ned's words were as great a revelation to Mrs Thornbury, and to the listening Janet, as his former declaration had been. Neither of them had ever suspected Ned of so much feeling, and each felt that a crisis was fast approaching. Yet Mrs Thornbury abated not one jot or tittle of her plea for her son to marry only amongst his own. She, perhaps, did not now so emphatically insist upon it, having a motherly regard for Ned's feelings, but her heart was as fixed as ever. On the other hand, Ned was more determined than ever to carry out his contract with Selina. Still, he wished to do it with his mother's consent, and was striving to do everything possible to amicably obtain it.

Meanwhile, Selina, all unconscious of the trouble she was causing, was pursuing her life in free and blissful innocence. Farmer Oakey's orchard lay open to the view from the smithy-house, and all that happened there could be easily seen from that 'vantage ground. All through the day, Selina's voice could be heard as she went about her work. Sometimes she was singing gaily and as light-hearted as the birds; at other times, her merry, pealing laughter came cheerily on the breeze, bringing with it the contagion of gladness. Gloom could not exist in her presence, and, in her own glad person, she was the very embodiment of all Nature and God intended that human life should be.

'Who is that singin'?' asked Mrs Thornbury one morning, shortly after Ned's dramatic words.

The question came upon Janet as a surprise, and she scarcely knew whether or not to answer.

'Is it *her?*' asked her mother, pointedly.

'Yes,' Janet acknowledged.

'Just carry my chair into th' garden, an' let me listen to her a wee.'

Greatly wondering, Janet obeyed with alacrity,

and there her mother sat in the sun for more than an hour, both listening and watching. And when Janet came to ask her if it were not time to go indoors again, she merely nodded her head towards the Oakeys, and said,

'Na, na, let me be a bit.'

'Her ha' got some spirits,' she said a moment or two afterwards.

Janet smiled with quiet satisfaction. Was her mother actually coming round to a more rational frame of mind after all?

'It do do m' old heart good to hear th' young so full o' life an' gladness.'

Then, as if she had suddenly become conscious of having been betrayed into the commending of a worldly spirit, she added regretfully, and with a sigh, 'But what a vain show it all be when not sanctified by grace!'

Still Janet felt thankful for this much, and she took it as the first sign of her mother's good-will towards Selina. Hope sprang up at once from the words, and she began eagerly to watch for anything that might strengthen it.

Her wish was gratified much sooner than she could have suspected, and in a most striking manner.

'Mother,' said Janet on the following Sabbath

morning, 'yo'r favourite preacher be planned to-day; wouldna yo' like to mak' an effort to cross ower to th' chapel?'

'Simeon Tandy?'

'Yes.'

It was only very rarely now that the venerable woman ventured beyond the garden gate, and she now hesitated a moment before replying.

'It be a beautiful mornin', mother,' urged Janet, 'an' if yo' could manage to get to th' service it ud cheer yo' oop a lil'l.'

'Mebbe, mebbe; Ah'll see how Ah do feel by then.'

Janet was delighted. She knew that was her mother's way of consenting, as indeed it proved, and that morning the Thornbury pew contained every member of the smithy household.

After the usual long prayer, following the opening hymn, it was customary for a 'chant' to be sung, but that morning an innovation was made at that point in the service. Instead of the chant, the preacher announced that one of the members of the choir would sing a solo.

'Yo'll find it in th' Mission Hymn-book, number Two hunder an' third.'

Thereupon the organist began to play the preliminary bars of 'The Ninety and Nine,' after which Selina Martin rose in her seat, and, in the presence of all the congregation, commenced to sing the hymn in a voice full of charm and thrilling power. Selina was a new member of the choir, having only sat there twice before; and it was the first time she had ever sung publicly in Woodleigh, though, it afterwards transpired, she had often sung in other places. Her rich voice was a complete revelation to all who heard her. From the first note she caught the sympathy of the congregation, and all sat listening breathlessly. By the time she had got to the end of the third verse, glistening tears began to fill many eyes and to dim the eyesight. But when at length she came to the words,

> '"Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way,
> That mark out the mountain's track?"'

an audible sobbing broke out over all the chapel.

At length the singing was finished, and Selina resumed her seat in dead silence. Simeon Tandy thereupon rose in the pulpit and looked round upon the congregation with anxious face.

'Be there ony lost sheep 'ere this mornin'?' he

asked in a voice choked with pathos; 'ony lost lambs what ha' wandered from th' fold? . . . After the beautiful way in which oor dear, young sister ha' sung th' blessed gospel, sure-*ly* yo' can't doubt that th' Good Shepherd be seekin' yo'r souls . . . an' that He be anxious to restore yo' to th' fol' again? Sinner! . . . Nay, Brother! . . . Sister!

'"Can yo' doubt that God is love,
If to all his bowels move?"'

'Won't yo' coom back home, yo' pore, homeless wanderers? . . . Yo'll be sure o' a welcome. . . . Coom! . . . Who'll be th' first? . . . Th' big heart o' God throbs for yo'.'

Then a marvellous thing happened,—marvellous to those who know nothing of such things, but common enough amongst the 'people called Methodists.' In every part of the chapel men and women instantly rose to their feet, quite a score in all, and made their way up the aisles to the penitent form, where they flung themselves down, crying aloud for mercy and pardon. The next instant the whole place was on 'fire.' Shouts of praise rang through the sacred building, the preaching service was immediately turned into a prayer-meeting, and that morning a

score of souls went down to their houses justified.

'Well, mother, what did yo' think o' it all?' asked Janet, when she had safely piloted her mother home, and got her once more into her old, familiar seat.

'It ha' bin a blessed season, Janet, a blessed season; God be praised!'

'An' what did yo' think o' Selina Martin?'

Janet could not help herself, and she felt that the time had arrived for once again pleading Ned's cause; indeed, that no other time could be more opportune.

'Her sings like an angel, Janet . . . it wur lovely. . . . Ah wur thinkin' in chapel Ah couldna wish for anything sweeter e'en in heaven itsel'.'

Janet's heart leapt with great thankfulness. But she did not just then press her mother further. She knew the seed had taken root, and at once busied herself in putting the dinner on the table.

Meanwhile Tom had gone down the garden to look at the fowls, and Ned had lingered behind at the chapel gates for Selina. It was his usual practice to escort her home from chapel when she attended.

'Ah'm feared, Janet,' Mrs Thornbury resumed, after a prolonged pause, and going back again to the subject last spoken about, 'that Ah've bin very stubborn about th' lass . . . but Ah see now that th' good God ha' more childer in th' worl' than us of'en do think. . . . Ah felt th' truth o' that flash home to m' heart as Ah listened Selina sing that beautiful hymn.'

It was the first time her mother had ever mentioned the 'alien's' name, having always before referred to her as 'her,' 'that un,' and such like, and Janet was thrilled with thankfulness. She was too full to speak, but, with swimming eyes, knelt down by her mother's knee, and held her wrinkled hands in hers.

'Ah've bin thinkin',' continued Mrs Thornbury, 'sin' Ah coom in that it be m' duty—— .'

But a sudden interruption took place. Just then the hasp of the door clicked, the door opened, and Ned came in.

For a moment he stood speechless at the picture he saw before him. But the devoted Janet was equal to the occasion. She had divined her mother's thought in an instant, and now, rising quickly to her feet, she turned her wet face, with its glad, glistening eyes, towards her brother.

'Ned,' she said, with strong emotion, 'Mother ud like yo' to bring Selina to tea this afternoon. Do yo' think her ud coom?'

Ned heard the words in amazement, and hardly knew where he was standing. His pride in his Selina's singing in the chapel that morning had been enough to fill him with almost unrestrainable joy. But this was measure upon measure, heaped up and running over.

He crossed the room to where his mother was sitting, and threw his big, strong arms round her neck.

'Coom!' he said, 'aye, mother, her ull coom, that Ah can venture . . . an' her ull be to yo' anoöther daughter, an' yo' to her a mother.'

* * * * *

Three months afterwards, Ned and Selina were married, amidst great rejoicings, and went to live in the smithy-house. And, in the course of time, there were again children in the old homestead, and the pattering of merry feet about the doors. But Mrs Thornbury did not live to see them. During the long and severe winter of that same year the dear old soul paid the full debt of Nature. But her supreme wish was granted. Ned Thornbury has three sons, and there is little

fear of the smithy passing into other hands. Indeed, some go so far as to say that while Woodleigh lasts there will always be a Thornbury at the smithy-house.

A
Member
O' th'
Boörd

A MEMBER O' TH' BOÖRD

I

A CURIOUS RECEPTION

ARTHUR ROSSON was but a beardless young fellow when he left college to enter upon his appointment as headmaster of the Woodleigh Board School. 'Book to Cleeve,' ran the clerk's letter, 'and Squire Woodleigh's man will meet you at the station.'

Squire Woodleigh's 'man' did meet the schoolmaster, but not in the manner that the latter had fondly suspected. There was no well-apportioned carriage with liveried servants, but, instead, a great lumbering waggon, into which the squire's 'man' unceremoniously pitched the schoolmaster's boxes, and then bluffly invited the schoolmaster to follow them.

'Thank you,' he said, ruefully eyeing the waggon, 'but I prefer to walk.'

The squire's 'man' in turn eyed the schoolmaster curiously.

'It be a goodish bit oop t' Woodleigh, an' yo'm ull be tired afore us gets there. Yo'd better jump oop.'

'How far is it?'

'Better nor five miles, sur—Glo'ster miles,' he added with emphasis, as if he would have the schoolmaster to know that Gloucester miles were longer than those of other counties. Whether they are or not let those judge who have tramped the hard, white limestone roads, the wearying roads between its distant villages.

The squire's 'man' was already in the waggon, so, pocketing his town-bred dignity, the schoolmaster at length got up beside him. The next moment they were started for Woodleigh.

Born and bred in the town, the ride through the country lanes was full of new sights and sounds for the schoolmaster. Almost everything was new and strange to him, and all full of charm. The fresh, sweet smell of the air, laden with the perfume of June flowers, the merry singing of the birds in the hedges and trees, the lowing of distant cattle, and the ever-growing loveliness of the landscape as they got

more and more into the heart of the country, filled him with silent emotion. For more than a mile he sat on the edge of the waggon, drinking in the scenes and not speaking a word.

After a time, however, the squire's 'man broke the silence.

'My name be James Thompson,' he said.

'Oh, indeed!' said the schoolmaster, somewhat absently.

'Yah, that be my name—James Thompson.'

There was a slight pause, and then just by way of courtesy, the schoolmaster opined, 'You are Squire Woodleigh's "man?"'

'Agent,' replied the countryman, with an air of importance.

Struck with his manner, the schoolmaster examined his companion more particularly. He was a big, uncouth, uncultivated-looking man, with big, fleshy hands, a big, red, fleshy face, and the dress of a farmer. The character of his dress alone certainly stamped him as an individual of more exalted station than that of what the clerk had, in his fine feudalistic vein, dubbed the 'Squire's man.' But a man town bred is apt to have curious notions of what is required in a farm-agent, and to think of him as a gentleman of education, a gentleman sweet, smooth,

and suave, and withal of great business capacities. That was the schoolmaster's mistake.

'Yo' didna 'xpect *me* t' meet yo'?' queried the agent, with particular stress upon the pronoun, and with a magnanimity scarcely describable.

'Hardly,' answered the schoolmaster, humouring him.

The answer plainly pleased the countryman. He sat silent a few moments, a broad grin of satisfaction upon his broad face, while he pleasantly flicked the horse's flanks with his whip. He seemed perfectly comfortable and at his ease upon the edge of the lumbering waggon, while the schoolmaster, on the opposite side, was sore and in agony with the jolting, and could scarcely retain his seat.

'Fact be, scheulmaister,' said the agent, leaning towards him, and speaking in a low, confidential tone, 'Hobbs oughter ha' met yo', but Ah thought it best t' coom mysel', so that Ah might put yo' oop to a thing or two afore yo' got mixed oop wi' a certain set o' Woodleigh foak. Yo' see, scheulmaister,' he went on in reassuring tones, as he noted the schoolmaster's amazement, 'there be queer foak in Woodleigh, an' a

stranger such as yo' be apt to mak' a mess o' it if he baint warned.

'There be the Tarlings, an' th' Thornburys, an' th' Prices, an' th' Hawleys, to say nothing of that old villain Simeon Tandy, the Methody local praicher, an' John Oakey; a set o' 'em, an' a bad set, too, Ah can tell yo'. 'Em ud ruin ony young man that wasn't warned,' and farmer James Thompson winked his eye, and shook his head knowingly. ''Em be a schemin' lot, 'em be, although 'em perfess religious, an' go t' Methody chapel every Sunday.'

'Be yo' a chapel man?' he asked, presently.

'It depends upon what kind of chapel you mean,' replied the schoolmaster, evasively.

'Be yo' a Dissenter? that's what Ah do mean.'

The schoolmaster said that he was proud to call himself such, and, at the bold confession, farmer James Thompson sat bolt upright in the waggon and looked aghast.

'It ull never do,' he said, gravely shaking his head. 'It ull never do. Boörd ull never 'low it.'

The intelligence seemed greatly to disturb him, and for the next half-mile he did not speak. He sat, with troubled face, brooding

over the schoolmaster's confession. But he got over it at last, and renewed the assault.

'Yo' baint married?'

'Hardly,' laughed the schoolmaster.

'O' coörse not. Yo' be nobbut a lad yet. Twenty—what? Ah forget th' figger.'

'You can scarcely forget what I have not mentioned,' answered the schoolmaster, still laughing.

Farmer James Thompson glanced at him with contempt.

'Scheulmaister,' he said impressively, 'p'raps yo' be not aware that Ah'm a member o' th' Boörd,' and at this awesome announcement the schoolmaster promptly simmered down to respectful decorum. 'Didna yo' put th' figger in yo'r paäpers?'

That the schoolmaster certainly had not done. For he quaked at his youth, knowing well that the mere mention of it at once barred him from all chance of success. In fact, it was a 'figger' he told to no one except under strongest compulsion, and even then he used to magnify it by saying that he should be such and such an age *next* birthday. Alas! he counts the other way now.

'Ah should never ha' voäted for a man as

wasn't open wi' th' Boörd;' and again the village magnate relapsed into silence.

By this time they had been jolted over nearly three miles of the road, and were then rumbling through the hamlet of Cleeve, which lies that distance from the railway station. Suddenly the sounds of wheels rang out on the road behind him, and, looking round, they espied a gig rapidly overtaking them.

'Dr Underhill,' vouchsafed Farmer Thompson; and, after a moment's pause, 'Member o' th' Boörd, an' a Guardian.'

'That is the doctor driving, I suppose?' queried the schoolmaster.

'H—mm; t'other be his man.'

The schoolmaster sat watching the gig drawing nearer, until, at length, he could clearly define the doctor's features.

'A hale, ruddy, happy-looking gentleman,' he observed, 'with silvery hair and a kindly eye.'

'Yo' can never judge a man by his looks,' whispered Farmer Thompson.

'Yon be a man yo' mun avoid, scheulmaister. He be a dangerous fellow, an' ud lead a'most onyone astray. He be the farmer's enemy, he be. Why, sur, sin' he cam' on th' Boörd, there's bin another penny pit on th' rates.' As he

spoke the agent pulled his left rein in order to make room for the gig to pass.

'Good morning, Thompson,' cried the doctor cheerily, as the gig shot by, at the same time raising his whip in salute, and, to the schoolmaster's complete astonishment, Farmer Thompson replied as cheerily.

'Plainly,' mused the schoolmaster, 'my escort is a man who can act a double part.'

'An' so yo' baint married?' again returning to the assault.

'No.'

'Nor likely to be?'

'That would be saying too much. I suppose I shall one day go the way of all flesh. But not yet awhile.'

'Th' Boörd ud liked to ha' a married man.'

'Well, at least I didn't deceive them in that,' said the schoolmaster.

'What be yo' goin' to do wi' th' scheulhouse?'

'I can hardly tell yet. I suppose I will have to get some one in.'

It was just the point for which farmer Thompson had all along been steering.

'Ah've a darter,' he said tentatively, and glanced sideways at his companion.

'Oh! indeed,' said the schoolmaster. But as yet he scarcely realised the countryman's drift, though he had a strange feeling that a grave crisis was approaching.

'Her be as good a girl as ever stepped in shoe leather.'

'And qualified——?'

'Qualified for onythin', sur. Her can clean, scrub, cook, bake, sew, knit, churn, an' play th' pianner.'

'The last accomplishment I shouldn't want,' said the schoolmaster.

'Mebbe yo' can play a bit yo'sel'?'

'A bit.'

'In that case her might sometimes accompany yo' in a piannerfort duet, or sing a bit. Her be well qualified for *that.* A beautiful v'ice, sur, a beautiful v'ice.'

'But I am afraid——'

'Doant yo' be feared, sur. Her ud suit yo' well. Yo' tak' m' word for't.'

'Is she—your daughter, I mean—is she a staid person?' gingerly ventured the schoolmaster.

''Tilda! As staid as a 'oman o' fifty when th' 'casion serves.'

'But she is *not* fifty?'

'Not twenty,' he cried, laughing at the school-

master's simplicity. 'An' pretty! An' hair like the tints o' th' leaves in autumn. An' curly, too, sur, nat'rally curly. Hangs down her back in long beauties. None o' yo' frizzing, sur, wi' 'Tilda. It be as nat'ral as nat'ral——'

His unwonted volubility suddenly exhausted itself, and he sat a moment or two looking at the schoolmaster inquiringly.

'What do yo' say t' Tilda, sur?'

'I am afraid she is too young——'

'Too young! What ud yo' 'ave?'

'A woman of maturer years. One that——'

'Yo' tak' m' advice, sur, an' go in for a wife younger than yo'sel'.'

'A wife! But I don't want a wife. I want a housekeeper. You have misunderstood me.'

Farmer Thompson looked at the schoolmaster in genuine amazement.

'Look yo' 'ere, young sur,' he said at length; 'yo' un'erstan' that Ah be a member o' th' Boörd?'

'Well, what of that?'

'What o' that, sur! Why, just this, that it won't do for yo' t' offend me. Ah baint th 'man t' stan' it, as ony o' Woodleigh foak ull tell yo' if yo' like t' ask 'em.

'Where does th' offence coom in? If that

doant beat everything for imperance! Do yo' think us country foak be so thick-skinned that us cannot feel when yo' smite us? Or do yo' tak' me for a gomerel that cannot un'erstan' when yo' insult me? Yo' think yo'rsel' very smart coomin' from college, doant yo'? And yo' think yo' can hoodwink us country foak? But yo' ull find yo'r mistake, sur, Ah tell yo' *that*,' and he flung out the word scornfully, at the same time accompanying it with a vigorous shaking of his great head.

'Yo' want 'Tilda for a housekeeper. If yo' knowed yo'r plaäce, sur, yo' udn't ha' dared mention such a thing, an' me a member of the Boörd. An' if yo' knowed where yo'r own interest lay yo' ud ha' jumped at 'Tilda—jumped, sur. Seventy pound a year an' a house an' garden be not to be despised, Ah can tell yo' that.'

'I hope,' said the schoolmaster, struggling to hide his amusement, 'that you do not believe me capable of such a crime?'

'Yo' doant seem to ha' sufficient worldly wisdom to know how yo' may keep 'em. But yo' be young yet, an' wi'out experience. Yo' ull larn better some day. Yo' ull larn that a noo man in a noo plaäce oughter mak' to hissel' frien's.

An' that yo' ull never do while foak look 'pon yo' as an alien. If yo' want to get on in Woodleigh, yo' must strike yo'r roots in its soil, an' be one o' us.

'Nay, there be no use in talkin'. Do yo' think us put oop that scheulhouse for an alien? Be yo' so daft as to think that us ud go to all that expense for a strange 'oman's son, just to find an easy livin' for a lad from furrin' parts? Yo' be dafter than Ah took yo' for if yo' does. What's to be got out o' that scheul in th' way o' salary must coom back t' Woodleigh's own, either to one o' its sons or darters. An' it be for yo' t' say which.'

II

A DESPOTIC MAJORITY

THE Woodleigh School Board consisted for years of the same five members—Squire Woodleigh, Parson Ellison, Thompson, the agent, John Holbrook, a drunken farmer, and Jethro D. Hawley, the village poet and postmaster. Young Marks, 'ower to Bycombe,' was the clerk, and the Board held its meetings quarterly. The Board was an unique one, having been in existence for more than six years before it attempted the erection of a school. Time after time the Board had met to consider this momentous question, but the meetings were always adjourned, and thus the first three years of the Board's life were passed in masterly inactivity. At length the authorities in London sent down a letter threatening to place the Board in default; but as its first term of office was just then expiring, and an election was being talked about, the Board quietly dissolved

itself and laughed at the ominous threat. As it turned out, no election took place, the same five members being again returned unopposed, but the interregnum gave the Board a few months' respite. On re-assembling, the Board actually did consider the question thrust upon them in the most serious manner possible, and went so far as to decide that something must be done. This important decision the clerk was instructed to report to the Department, and then the Board again adjourned. When the next meeting came round, three of the members were absent, each of them having 'pressing business engagements,' and the meeting was deferred for want of a quorum. The election had taken place in November, and it was the month of June before the Board met again to resume the consideration of the statement it had transmitted to the Department; then it was found that the Squire, the Board's respected chairman, had gone to the Continent, and it was therefore thought undesirable to come to any decision in his absence. The meeting was therefore once again adjourned until September, when it re-assembled in full strength and seriously got to work. The minutes of the last meeting being called for and read, and also a stinging com-

munication from the Department which the clerk had received in the interim, the Board expressed itself as astounded that so long a time had passed since its last meeting, and began to feel squeamish about its conduct.

'Something will have to be done, gentlemen,' said the chairman.

'Yes, something must be done,' echoed the parson.

'And done at once,' said Jethro D. Hawley, who, as the only advanced man on the Board, had earned for himself the unenviable distinction of continually being in opposition to the other four members. 'It is about time, gentlemen, that we acted honourably towards the Department in this matter, and towards the children of this parish.'

At this exalted speech Squire Woodleigh drew himself up in dignified amazement, and his three coadjutors mimicked his example.

'I should like Mr Hawley to explain himself,' said Parson Ellison, stiffly; 'I consider such words a reflection upon the whole of this Board. In what way, I should like to know, has the Board acted dishonourably?'

But such scenes were of frequent occurrence on the Board between the selfsame parties, and

Jethro Hawley was in no humour to waste another meeting in personalities. He, however, declared his intention of not continuing much longer a member of a Board that only met to repeatedly adjourn.

'Ah doant know,' said Farmer Thompson, bluffly, 'that Boörd ull miss yo' when yo' be gone. There be other foak what do know th' poöblic's wishes in this matter a sight better than yo'.'

'I am quite in agreement with you in that, said Jethro, blandly; 'there is Dr Underhill, for example,' and at the mention of the doctor's name James Thompson grew furious.

'Him ull never sit on this 'ere Boörd while Ah be in Woodleigh,' he said doggedly, and shook his great head emphatically.

Despite the agent's threat, however, Dr Underhill was elected a member of the Board at the next election, displacing John Holbrook, who had sat on the Board ever since its formation, but who had only sat to register his vote for the agent's party. The doctor's election was a bitter pill to Farmer Thompson, and he set himself to oppose the minority of two in every way in his power.

The first meeting of the new Board found

the work advanced so far as the choosing of a site for the proposed school, and a year was spent considering the Board's views as to the kind of building which should be erected. By dint of persistent urging on the part of the minority, a plan of the building was at length drawn and submitted to the Department, and, after having been returned again and again for alterations, the Board at last inserted an advertisement in *The Spaton Gazette* for tenders. But the end was not yet. Farmer Thompson's mandate had gone forth, and the consideration of the tenders was to be indefinitely delayed, as 'Woodleigh foak wurn't goin' to ha' th' scheul thrust down their throats for all th' Departments under th' sun.' When, however, the day fixed for opening the tenders arrived, good fortune favoured the minority. Both the squire and his 'man' had business in London in connection with a law-suit concerning an outlying and disputed part of the Woodleigh estate, and the long-suffering minority was for once converted into a majority. In vain Parson Ellison, the chairman, tried to shelve the question 'until such times as the squire should return;' the minority would not permit it.

'There has been enough of dilly-dalling in this matter,' said Jethro Hawley angrily, the exultation of an assured success kindling in his eyes, 'and I propose that we at once proceed to business.'

'Well,' said the parson, 'we are two against two.'

'How do you make that out?' asked Jethro, indignantly.

'There's you and Underhill on one side, and myself and the clerk on the other. And then you know,' with a leer, 'I have also got the casting vote.'

'The clerk is not a member of this Board,' said Jethro, hotly. 'He is the Board's servant.'

Parson Ellison shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

'That is a question the Board will decide at its next meeting,' he said, 'but meantime I am bound to allow a custom which has always prevailed upon this Board.'

But the clerk himself demurred. He had had a legal training of a kind, and knew that he had no vote. His reason for voting in the past was only for the purpose of expediting business, and of getting back again as soon as possible to Bycombe; but, now that his vote was chal-

lenged, he at once assured the chairman that he had no franchise. The tenders were consequently opened and read.

'I move that Mr Peart's tender be accepted,' said Dr Underhill.

'I second it,' said Jethro.

Parson Ellison looked contemptuous.

'What does he know of building?' he sneered.

'You would infer, then,' said Dr Underhill, 'that a Woodleigh man is necessarily an ignoramus?'

'I know *one* that is,' said the parson, with an ugly glance at Jethro.

'Thank you,' said Jethro, rightly interpreting the slur as meant for him; 'and I know a parson that is more fitted for following the hounds than saving people's souls.'

After these, and other such complimentary courtesies, the proposition that tenders be opened was put to the meeting and carried—carried by the two who had moved and seconded it, the parson angrily refusing to vote at all. And that is the way the Board School was built in Woodleigh—a school of which Her Majesty's Inspector afterwards reported, 'After nine years the Board has built a school in which the cupboards are so damp that the books are mouldy,

and the teacher's residence insanitary and uninhabitable.'

Shortly after the opening of the school, the schoolmaster applied for an assistant, and the Board solemnly considered the question at its next meeting.

'The schoolmaster informs me,' said the clerk, 'that a female teacher is needed to take charge of the infants and the sewing.'

'That is so?' queried the chairman, turning to the schoolmaster, who had been asked to be present.

'Yes.'

'Ha' us no gals o' oor own what ud suit?' asked Farmer Thompson.

'I am afraid not,' said the schoolmaster, smiling.

Farmer Thompson glared at him savagely.

'Yo' be afeared not! Why not, sur? Baint a Woodleigh gal as good as ony other?'

'It is not a question of goodness, but of fitness,' replied the schoolmaster. 'The person appointed must satisfy the Department.'

'There be my own gal 'Tilda,' said the farmer, 'her be on m' hands, an' if there be onything to get out o' this 'ere scheul, Ah doant see why one o' oor own ought not to ha' it as well as anoöther.

'Em as pays th' rates oughter ha' first chance; that be to my way o' thinkin'.'

With this precious sentiment the majority at once agreed, Parson Ellison remarking that the appointment of a local candidate would be a kind of wholesome encouragement to the whole of the youth of the village to prepare themselves for any likely vacancies that might occur in the future.

'Is there any article in the Code,' asked the chairman, 'which would prevent Thompson's girl being appointed?'

'On the contrary,' said the clerk, 'there is one directly encouraging—'

'Incompetency,' said Dr Underhill.

'Encouraging,' continued the clerk, 'gentlewomen over eighteen years of age, to devote their lives to the sacred cause of education.'

'Rubbish!' exclaimed Jethro D. Hawley.

'I refer to Article 68,' said the clerk indignantly.

'And I characterise your reading of it as rubbish,' retorted Jethro.

'I appeal to the chairman for protection,' said the clerk, with an injured tone.

'Oh! bother protection,' said the chairman; 'you ought to be pretty well used to this thing by

now. The question is, Can we engage Thompson's daughter?'

'Certainly.'

'Then I move it,' said the squire.

'And I second it,' said the parson.

'Before it is put,' said Dr Underhill rising, 'I should like to point out to the Board the folly—'

The squire sat vigorously shaking his head.

'What is the use of doing so?' he asked. 'You are only wasting the time of the Board. You and Hawley, you know, stole a march upon us in the building of this school, and we are having our innings now. Is there any amendment? None? Then I will put it. All in favour? One, two, three. Against? One, two. I declare the motion carried. And now, gentlemen, Mr Ellison and I have got to meet the hounds at Didbrok at three, and if there is no other business we will close.'

Jethro Hawley sprang to his feet.

'I protest——' he was beginning, when the squire silenced him.

'If you do so,' said the squire, with outstretched palms and a shrugging of his shoulders, 'we shall simply vote upon it, you know,' and the Board abruptly rose.

That night at dark Farmer Thompson called at the schoolhouse.

'Now, scheulmaister,' he said, so soon as he had settled himself in an easy-chair, 'Ah've called to coom to an un'erstan'in' wi' yo'. An' Ah may say at th' outset that what Ah wants be for us to be frien's.'

'Are we not so already?' queried the schoolmaster.

'Us be an' us baint, if yo' can un'erstan' English. But there be no good in mincin' matters, an' Ah'm allus a man o' a few words—few but straight uns. Now there be 'Tilda; yo' be agen her, baint yo'?'

'In what way?'

'Now, scheulmaister, look yo' 'ere. Ah won't bandy words wi' yo' any longer, but ull coom to th' point at once. Yo' be agen 'Tilda; that be as plain as a pikestaff. Yo'd ha' prevented the Boörd from engagin' her' if yo' could on'y ha' had yo'r way. Baint that true? There be no use beatin' about th' boösh.'

'I made no objection to Miss Thompson more than to any other unqualified person.'

'Stop!' exclaimed Thompson, shaking his head. 'Doant yo' say that. Yo' perfess to be a Methody, yo' know. 'Tilda baint unqualified,

so doant yo' tell lies. What ud yo' call unqualified? Baint th' Noo Code th' law 'pon th' subject?'

The schoolmaster perceived that it was useless to argue with the farmer upon such a subject, and discreetly held his peace.

'Well, now, what Ah do want to know be this, Be us to be frien's?'

'I certainly have no desire to be unfriendly,' diplomatically replied the schoolmaster.

'An' 'Tilda? Yo' ull treat her proper?'

The schoolmaster was growing indignant, and the farmer noticed it.

'Doant yo' get yo'r blood oop, young sur. Yo' know what Ah tol' yo' th' day yo' first coom to Woodleigh. To get on in Woodleigh yo' must be one o' us, an' Ah'm puttin' th' rare chance into yo' road. 'Tilda ull be yo'r ekal now. Her ull be larnin' the childer all day long wi' yo' in scheul, an' yo' ull ha' ev'ry opportoonity o' doin' th' right thing by her—'

'Really, Mr Thompson—'

'Yo' just wait, sur; 'low me to finish. Yo' ha' seed a thing or two to-day. Yo' know, now, how yo' stan', an' who can be yo'r frien's. Yo' ha' seed that James Thompson be a power in Woodleigh, an' it be for yo' now to mak' yo'r choice

atween him an' such oopstarts as Jethro Hawley an' Dr Underhill.'

The schoolmaster rose to his feet indignantly. 'Mr Thompson, do you see that door?'

'Ah do; what o' it?'

'I will trouble you to pass out through it,' and, as he spoke, the schoolmaster flung the door wide open.

The farmer's face always wore an habitual red, but a bright spot flamed his cheeks as he struggled to his feet.

'Ah'm not at all wishin' to hurry yo' in yo'r decision,' he said, as he passed out; 'but yo' know m' terms, scheulmaister, an' if yo' wish to make me yo'r frien'—well, yo' know what to do.'

When the farmer was gone the schoolmaster sat down and laughed. Such a preposterous individual could not possibly be taken seriously. Either he was an imbecile or he was hoaxing. But the next meeting of the Board proved both these thoughts to be wrong.

'Ah've a charge to bring agen scheulmaister,' said Thompson.

All the members looked up in amazement. Even the squire shared in this feeling.

'Ah've to charge scheulmaister wi' dawdlin' an' gettin' oor money by false pretences.'

The clerk held up his hand deprecatingly.

'No, no,' said Thompson, stubbornly shaking his head; 'Ah'm not goin' to be deterred from doin' m' dooty to the foak o' this parish.'

'Mr Thompson refers to the interval given every morning and afternoon for recreation,' explained the clerk. 'He has spoken to me about it, but I—'

'Ah call that interval downright fraud,' said Thompson.

'Is it allowed by the Code?' asked the chairman.

'Not only allowed, but ordered,' replied the clerk.

'Ah should like to know if us ha' to pay for such laziness—'

'Hush, hush!' said the squire. 'Your complaint, Thompson, is frivolous.'

For a moment Thompson was crestfallen, but he muttered something about men 'as on'y worked half o' their time, an' got paid for a Saturday's idleness.' Then presently he returned to the attack.

'Ah've anoöther charge,' he said. 'Ah've to

complain that scheulmaister be larnin' oor childer heretics.'

'What!' exclaimed the chairman in amusement, while Jethro and Dr Underhill laughed outright.

'Heresies,' explained the clerk.

'That is a far more serious matter,' said Parson Ellison.

'Him be larnin' th' scholards that us what be not pratin' Methodies be all damned sinners, an' that us all be goin' to hell.'

'Shocking, shocking,' said the parson.

'Do you mean to tell us,' demanded Dr Underhill, 'that such words have been used in the school?'

'Ah doant care where un ha' said 'em, 'em mean th' same. Why, he even attacked Maister Ellison th' other day, an' said as how he wur no fit person to praich th' blessed Gospel.'

'Humph!' chuttered Jethro, 'I have said as much as that myself over and over again.'

Dr Underhill placed his hand on Jethro's shoulder.

'Let us have this thing out,' he said. 'Were these words used in the school or in the chapel over the way?'

'What does it matter where they were used?'

said the parson ; 'it is the pernicious teaching we are dealing with.'

'Not at all,' said the doctor ; 'every man has a right to his opinion, and I maintain that it is the place where the words were used which must decide our action. Now, as a matter of fact, these words were not used in the school—'

'Nor anywhere else,' said Jethro.

'We will not go into that,' said the doctor. 'My point is that we have no jurisdiction over the schoolmaster out of school.'

'I think,' said the clerk, 'Dr Underhill is right.'

'Yet,' said the squire, 'it is most unfortunate that such words should have been used, and I think we may take it for granted that such words are beyond a schoolmaster's province to utter, considering him as a public servant. With that, Thompson, I think we can let the matter now drop. Only a fanatic, you know, would utter such absurdities.'

'But, squire !—'

'Take my advice, Thompson, and only fight when you are sure of victory.'

That brought Jethro to his feet.

'I have a counter-charge, Mr Chairman,' he said.

The squire waved his hand impatiently.

'We won't listen to it now.'

'Then when will you?'

'At the next election,' said Dr Underhill significantly.

'Which takes place next month,' said Jethro. 'Very well, we will make our charge then.'

'That is your declaration of war?' asked the parson.

'You may take it as such,' replied Jethro.

'You hear that, Thompson?' asked the squire.

'Ah do, sur, an' us ull fight 'em to th' death.'

III

AN APPEAL TO THE ELECTORATE

JETHRO was by no means a typical Methodist —indeed, I doubt whether he had ever been to the penitent form ; but on the Woodleigh School Board he stood for all that was sacred and dear to the handful of earnest souls who worshipped in the little village chapel. His father before him had been a glorious man 'ower to Bycombe,' where there had been a Methodist chapel years before the Woodleigh society was planted ; but Jethro had never been anything more than a fairly regular attendant at the evening services, and his name was not to be found on any of the class-books. Still, he was always the hope of Woodleigh Methodism, and many were the secret prayers which were put up daily for his conversion, Simeon Tandy making no concealment of the fact that he never omitted Jethro's name at the Throne of Grace.

'Jethro be a true man at heart,' Simeon used to say of him. 'All un wants be just the touch o' the finger o' God to mak' un th' foremost man in the Spaton circuit.' And with this sentiment almost every one agreed.

The fact was, Jethro was the only man amongst the chapel folk who made any pretence at learning. Nearly all the others had been brought up at the tail of the plough, and knew more about manures and crops than book-learning. But Jethro was reputed to be a well-read man, and, at first blush, he certainly strongly impressed a stranger with that view. The truth, however, was that Jethro had had as little schooling as his fellow villagers, but he had been born with an insatiable love for knowledge, and he had stocked his home with books from kitchen to bedroom, most of which he had either read or intelligently dipped into. He was thus the one man amongst the Woodleigh Methodists (for Dr Underhill really was a member of the Establishment, though he would not countenance the sporting Parson Ellison) who could meet the other members of the Board on fairly equal ground, and he had never done any discredit to the confidence reposed in him by the chapel folk.

About a week after the Board meeting the

leaders and stewards met in the vestry to consider the best means of guarding the interests of Methodism on the Board.

'Jethro do say,' said Jesse Stallard, who, as senior steward, was chairman of the meeting, 'that it be goin' to be a big fight, an' that it ull tak' us all oor time to hol' oor own.'

'Ah doant think, Maister Chairman,' said John Oakey, 'that us need be afeared o' th' fight, an' Ah b'lieve us be well able to pit oor men on the Boörd again.'

'Ah'm entirely o' th' same way o' thinkin',' said Thomas Tarling.

'P'raps us could coom more directly to business,' said the chairman, 'by asking a question: Be us satisfied wi' things as 'em be?'

Quite a chorus of emphatic 'Noes' answered the question.

'Well, that be th' first thing,' said the chairman. 'Us be all agreed as to that?

This time the loud chorus was of assent.

'Then th' nex' question be,' said the chairman, 'what can us do to mend 'em?'

'Afore us coom to that,' said Simeon, rising, 'Ah should just like to say a word. This baint a political mittin'—

'Sure-*ly* not,' acquiesced several of the brethren in amazement.

'As Methodists us know nothin' o' politics, an' once politics be introduced into oor church, it ull be a bad day for Methodism.'

Again the fathers assented.

'Then what be us 'ere for? Us be 'ere gathered t'gether for th' purpose o' lookin' after the interests o' Methodism on th' Scheul Boörd, Ah tak' it. Am Ah right or wrong? Ah want us to properly un'erstan' each afore us do proceed?'

'Th' interests o' Methodism an' th' childer o' th' village,' said the chairman.

'Yes, an' th' childer o' th' village,' said Simeon. 'Us ha' got a sacred dooty to carry out to'ards 'em. Us must see to it that th' pore childer be delivered from th' snare o' th' fowler. An' there be scheulmaister—us ha' got an interest in him, too. He ha' bin a blessin' to all o' us sin' he cam' 'ere, an' to th' whole parish. There be those who can't 'bide un, just 'cause un be a man o' God an' a Methodist, an' 'em ull do all 'em can to drive un from oor midst, but God be on oor side an' on his'n. Now Ah'm tol' that t'other party on Boörd be goin' to try an' capture all th' seats on th' Boörd.'

At this announcement a look of consternation sat for a moment on the countenances of all present.

'Yes, frien's, that be so,' Simeon said solemnly. 'Ah've it from Jethro hissel'.' There's to be war to th' knife. Jethro tells me that John Holbrook be goin' to stan' against doctor, an' Thompson ha' got a promise from the lan'lor' o' th' "Green Dragon" to pit oop against Jethro.'

The brethren glanced at each other with incredulous amazement.

'Now, th' question in m' mind be this,' continued Simeon, 'can us run oor two men in face o' this?'

There was a moment's pause, and then John Oakey spoke.

'Ah doant see why not,' he said. 'Methodism be strong enough in Woodleigh to run two, sure-*ly*.'

'Strong enough to run three,' said Simeon, and the words met with instant approval.

'Well, brethren,' said Simeon, after a pause, 'Ah'm thankful to see th' feelin' which be 'ere manifested. Ah thank God for it, an' Ah've got a note o' vict'ry a'ready soundin' in m' heart 'cause o' it. But us mustn't deceive oorsel's. Th' enemy be strong, an' this be goin' to be a

big fight. It be goin' to be a fight atween th' power o' Satan an' the Kingdom o' God. Ah'm not uncharitable, frien's, an' Ah be perfectly willin' to 'low that t'other side oughter ha' a fair share on th' Boörd ; but who does 'em represent ? Not th' majority, but th' minority ; not the people, but th' squire an' th' parson ; not th' edication o' th' childer, even ; 'em just represent ev'rything what 'ud pit back th' finger o' th' clock o' time into last century.

'There be Pa'son Ellison, for instance. Ah heard un mysel' say t'other day as how childer wur bein' larned oop to sich a pitch that 'em ud be no good for work just now, an' at last Boörd mittin' Thompson said, so Jethro did say, as how when th' head was full o' readin' an' writin' that th' lads ud mak' pore hands on a farm, an' th' gals be good for nothin' but idlin' their time away wi' books. Now us doant b'lieve any sich nonsense as that, an' oor childer, not if us can help it, be not goin' to be kept slaves all their lives. Edication ull on'y mak' th' lads better workmen an' th' gals better housewives. . . . But to th' point, frien's—shall us run three men ?'

'Three !' several of the brethren exclaimed together.

'Us ha' never bin fairly treated on th' Boörd, an' us oughter ha' th' majority; an' unless us does us ull be trodden under th' heel o' Thompson.'

Simeon had by no means exhausted himself, but he now sat down a moment so as to give the others a chance of expressing their views.

'Th' question be,' said the chairman, 'be us to run three men? Ah may say that Ah'm personally perfectly agreed, but Ah'd like us first to consider th' matter all roun'. If us do run three, can us pit 'em in? Ah tak' it that be th' first question. An', on th' other hand, if us do run three, will us risk th' seats o' th' doctor an Jethro?'

'Ah think,' said Thomas Tarling, 'Jesse's questions be fair an' proper ones for us to consider. Whatever us does us mustn't risk th' seats us ha' got a'ready.'

'My opinion be,' said John Oakey, save Simeon, the oldest man in years amongst those present, but the youngest in spirit, 'that us ull carry all three.'

'Would it not be well to ask Circuit Stooard's opinion on th' matter?' asked a brother who had not before spoken. 'Bein' a lawyer, he ud know a thing or two 'bout sich a job as this.'

Simeon Tandy rose to his feet.

'Ah may say at once,' he began, 'Ah've a'ready consulted Maister Priestly,' an announcement which caused all present to open their eyes in great astonishment. 'Aaron's view be,' continued Simeon, 'that us cannot on'y return three members, but that it be oor bounden dooty to do so. Aaron says as how us oughter hol' th' balance o' power on the Boörd, an' that it ull be a disgrace to us if us doant, an' a dishonour to Methodism. Moreover, if us ull on'y go in for runnin' three men, Aaron ha' promised to send one o' his clerks ower to Woodleigh to organise us for vict'ry.'

That settled the matter, and, when Jesse put the motion to the meeting that three candidates be adopted, it was carried unanimously.

'An' now,' said Simeon, again rising, 'who are to be oor candidates?'

'Jethro for one,' several exclaimed together.

'Those in favour?' asked the chairman, and every hand went up.

'Dr Underhill for anoöther.'

'Be yo' all agreed?'

'All,' came the hearty response.

'An' now Ah beg to propose anoöther name,' said Simeon, again getting to his feet. 'Ah

beg to propose that Brother Thomas Tarling be oor third man.'

Thomas Tarling rose protesting.

'Just 'low Simeon, Thomas, to finish,' said the chairman.

'Ah knowed Thomas ud at once demur, but us 'on't lis'en to that. Thomas can do us good service on th' Boörd, an' Ah doant know anoöther man 'mongst us likely to be better supported by th' foak o' th' parish.'

'Ah'd rather some other brother—'

'It be for th' cause o' God,' interrupted the chairman, and Thomas Tarling at once capitulated.

'An' now,' asked the chairman, 'be there ony other business?'

'Ah s'pose Jethro ull be invited to oor mittin's while this fight be goin' on?' asked John Oakey.

'Sure-*ly*,' said the chairman, 'an' th' doctor.'

'There be just one more thing afore us do close,' said Simeon. 'Would it not be well to ha' a week o' special prayer about this matter? Us mustn't think o' enterin' 'pon this warfare in oor own strength, an' us cannot be better equipped than by bein' full o' th' power o' God.'

'What d' yo' say, brethren?' asked the chairman.

'Sure-*ly*, sure-*ly*,' responded all in the room, and the suggestion was at once agreed upon.

Meanwhile the other side was also busy, but their preparations were in strong contrast with the Methodists'. Thompson had opened his campaign in the bar-room of the 'Green Dragon,' and there a motley crew gathered night after night, more for the purpose of drinking the agent's beer than fighting for any principle which they had at stake. Here Thompson laid his plans and primed his men.

'What us be going to do,' he would repeat at intervals, with growing hatred and always with an oath, 'be to sweep th' Boörd o' all these pratin' Methodies. Us ull mak' mincemeat o' 'em, boys, afore us ha' finished wi' 'em.'

'Ha! ha!' he would exclaim at another time, with a loud guffaw, 'Ah do hear as how 'em be goin' to try an' capture my seat, an' pit Tarlin' o' th' Ivies in i'stead. Let 'em try it on, be all Ah say; it ull on'y help us to wipe 'em out th' easier. There be one thing Ah tell yo' all, an' yo' must mak' yo'r voäters un'erstan' it: Squire ull stan' no nonsense wi' ony traitor. Th' man or woman what voätes for th' Methodies ull be a marked man or woman, an' 'em 'ad better clear out o' Woodleigh smart. D' yo' think squire be goin

to 'low ony' one what gets their livin' out o' un to slap un in th' face? He'd be a born fool if he did. Here, Reeves, fill oop th' men's mugs, an' let 'em drink to th' damnation o' th' Methodies!'

One night the drunken Thompsonites at the 'Green Dragon' were thrown into no little consternation by a report which one of their company had just brought in.

'Tell us that again,' said Thompson, half incredulous, and with a look of savagery on his bloated face.

'Why, it be nothin' more than this: Lawyer Priestly o' Spaton ha' bin an' gone an' sent his man ower 'ere to Woodleigh to help th' Methodies in th' 'lection. 'Em do say as how the man ha' bin to a'most ev'ry cottage in th' village askin' for voätes for the Methodies.'

'Him ha'n't bin to oorn,' swore one of the men.

'Nor to oorn,' vociferated another, and the disavowal was echoed by nearly all present.

Thompson ground his teeth with rage, and brought his great fist heavily down upon the table, making the pewter mugs and glasses ring again, and, with an oath, vowed that he would 'larn un a lesson afore he wur much older.' Then they fell to discussing how they

might best counteract the work of Lawyer Priestly's 'man.'

'Th' oopshot o' it all be,' said John Holbrook, 'that we must canvass like 'em.'

'Be yo' wullin', John?' asked Thompson.

Holbrook readily assented.

'Very well,' said Thompson, 'us ull consider that matter as settled. Yo' an' me ull manage th' job nicely atween us wi'out askin' ony one else to help us. Us can do it, John Holbrook, fine,' and there was a sinister meaning in Thompson's words which was not lost upon the drunken set in the tap-room of the 'Green Dragon.'

Next day this amiable pair might have been seen passing from cottage to cottage soliciting votes for the Thompsonites. They did not know it until later in the day, when the two parties accidentally met; but in another part of the village Simeon Tandy, Jethro D. Hawley, Thomas Tarling, and Aaron Priestly's clerk were at that moment engaged at similar work for the Methodists.

'Now, Hobbs,' said Thompson, as he and Holbrook entered one cottage, 'us ha' called 'bout this 'ere Scheul Boörd 'lection.'

'Yes,' said the man demurely.

'Ah, s'pose,' said Thompson, 'yo' know 'pon which side yo'r bread be buttered?'

Hobbs glanced at the agent in bewilderment.

'What Ah mean be,' said Thompson, 'that us wants yo'r voäte an' int'rest in this 'lection. Just look at this card,' and the agent showed Hobbs a facsimile of the voting paper, somewhat of this description :—

No.	Voting Paper	
1.	Ellison	1.
2.	Hawley	
3.	Holbrook	1.
4.	Reeves	1.
5.	Tarling	
6.	Thompson	1.
7.	Underhill	
8.	Woodleigh	1.

'Yo' see, Hobbs,' continued Thompson, 'there

be eight candidates for the five seats on th' Boörd, an' that a stroke be put after oor men. Pa'son Ellison, Holbrook 'ere, an' Reeves, an' me, an' Squire. Now us wants yo' to voäte for these five, all good men an' true—men, mark yo', Hobbs, as knows yo'r int'rests, an' what ull look after 'em. When 'lection day cooms yo' ha' just got to go to booth an' pit yo'r mark oppo-*site* these five names. . . . Let m' see, Hobbs, yo' be a Dissenter, baint yo'?'

'Ah be, sur,' said the man, half-apologetically.

'Well,' and Thompson restrained an oath, 'this be a question o' bread an' butter wi' yo', yo' know, an' ha' nothin' whatever to do wi' th' chapel. Yo' see, t'other side be pitting Hawley oop again, an' Underhill, an' 'em bin an' gone an' added Tarlin' o' th' Ivies; but as for what he knows about edication, Ah'm at a loss to tell. He be more fit for slaughterin' th' poultry than lookin' after th' young an' risin' generation, an' un be as great a tom-fool as there be in th' parish. . . . But th' point be, Hobbs, be us to ha' yo'r voätes?'

Poor Hobbs was dumfounded and troubled. In his heart he wished the School Board just then far enough. He felt he dared not cross the

blatant autocrat now blocking his doorway, yet he had no wish to promise him his votes.

'Ah may tell yo', Hobbs, that if us loses this 'lection there ull be some shiftin's about in Woodleigh. Squire beant goin' to tolerate those what oppose un, an' those what do ull ha' to mak' room for those what knows where their int'rests lie.'

'Coom, Hobbs,' said Holbrook irritably, 'us cannot stay 'ere all day. What d' yo' say?'

'Say!' exclaimed Hobbs with well-feigned assent, 'why, that Ah be goin' to voäte for yo'r party, o' coörse.'

'That's right,' said Thompson, clapping him on the back. 'Yo' be a man, Hobbs, a man. Yo' oughter never to be a Dissenter; yo' be too strong a man for that set. Just step 'long to th' "Green Dragon" an' tell Reeves to give yo' a pint o' ale, an' to pit it down to m' score.'

'Thank yo', sur,' said Hobbs, 'but Ah'll not be takin' ony to-day.'

'Well, good mornin', Hobbs. Ah'm glad to see that there be one sensible Dissenter in th' village.'

Now, during this conversation, Mrs Hobbs had been standing behind the door listening and trembling all over.

'Ah'm right thankful, Hobbs,' she exclaimed, so soon as the door was once again closed (Woodleigh wives always omitted the Christian name in speaking of or in addressing their husbands) 'that yo' refused to ha' ony o' his ale, th' drunken sot! But why did yo' promise yo'r voäte? Ah'm real 'shamed o' yo', Hobbs.'

'Yo' heard what 'em said, as how it be a question o' bread an' butter?'

'Ah did, but yo' tol' Lawyer Priestly's man yesterday that yo' ud voäte for Jethro, an' th' doctor, an' Tarlin'.'

'Hush!' whispered Hobbs, fearfully. 'So Ah did an' so Ah wull.'

'Then why—?'

'Hush! Ah tell yo'. Ah certainly mean to give squire a voäte, for Ah thinks as how it be on'y right that he should be on th' Boörd, but my t'other fower ull go—two to th' doctor, one to Jethro, an' one to Tarlin'. But not a word o' this, mind yo', Mary Ann; us cannot risk goin' again Thompson, but us can keep oor own counsel.'

At the next door Thompson met with a different reception. The cottager's name was Reuben Chess, and he was known as the village politician.

'Ah shan't tell yo' who Ah be goin' to voäte for,' he answered angrily, 'an' yo' ha' no right to ask me.'

'That be it, be it?' wrathfully exclaimed Thompson.

'Aye, that be it,' replied Chess, with acerbity, 'an' yo' can just tak' yo'rsel' off as soon as yo' like. If Ah gets m' livin' out o' squire's propperty, squire gets m' labour out o' me, an' so us be quits. Ah gets nothin' more'n Ah earn, but summat less, an' Ah'm as much service to squire as squire is to me, an' more.'

'Now, look yo' 'ere, Chess, yo' be talkin' too big,' said Holbrook, threateningly, for the agent was too much struck with amazement at the man's audacity to speak, 'an' yo'd best be careful. Yo' be goin' to pit yo'r thick head in a waps' nest, Ah can well see. Yo' great stoopid, yo' can't live wi'out squire—'

'No more can he wi'out me an' m' likes. What be th' good o' his money wi'out th' workin'-man's labour?'

Holbrook laughed ironically.

'Squire can get a score o' better men than yo' ony day,' he said.

'Why doant un get 'em, then? He be a born fool to hire me if other men can serve un

better, but Thompson knows that be a lie, an no man can charge me wi' not earnin' m' wages.'

Thompson's tongue was at length loosened.

'Yo' think a mighty lot o' yo'rsel',' he said, with an oath, 'but after Ah gets this 'lection off m' hands Ah'll ha' time to turn m' attention to yo' a lil'l, m' bold fellow. Yo' may as well pack yo' things oop ready.'

Reuben Chess flew into a passion.

'That be a threat,' he cried, 'o' which yo' ull hear again. Ah'll see to it that it be reported in th' proper quarter. It be 'timidation, an' ull void yo'r 'lection, if foaks be so daft as to return yo'.'

On the whole, however, the agent met with apparently good success and an amount of servility truly surprising; and when, at dusk, he had grown tired of bullying the cottagers, he and his boon companion turned their steps once again towards the 'Green Dragon.'

Repassing Reuben Chess's door, they were amazed to see Lawyer Priestly's clerk and Jethro D. Hawley, with Simeon Tandy and Thomas Tarling, in close conversation with Chess. Their heads were all placed closely together, and the clerk was solemnly taking

notes of what Chess was saying. Thompson and his friend stood aghast for a moment. Then Thompson's rage got the better of him. He strode angrily towards the little group and swore shockingly. Then, turning upon Chess, he told him that his work in Woodleigh from that moment was over—a statement, however, which was traversed by Jethro.

'This quite corroborates this good man's statement,' said the clerk imperturbably, when at length Thompson paused for breath; 'I will just make a note of it. It is very fortunate to have so many witnesses.'

Corroboration, however, was not needed. The election results were the best judgment on the Thompsonites. They were made known the day after the election, and, of the chapel folk, Ned Thornbury got the first inkling of them from a gentleman whose horse he was shoeing, and who had just come from the squire's.

'Pa'son's out, at ony rate,' he called over the garden wall to John Oakey, his neighbour.

'Bravo!' cried the old man in delight. 'Be squire in?'

'Yea, he be top o' th' poll.'

'Who cooms nex'?'

'Ah dunno; gen'l'man couldn't 'member other

names, not bein' familiar wi' these parts, but us ull hear soon now.'

As they did in about half-an-hour's time, when Jethro himself came down the village, triumphantly waving a paper with the results.

'Gather round! Gather round!' he cried, as the cottagers flocked towards him from all parts. He had taken his stand near the smithy, and Ned Thornbury and John Oakey were standing by his side, while Thompson could be seen peeping savagely out of his door a dozen yards away.

'Now listen, friends. We have won a glorious victory. Here are the results:—

1.	Woodleigh . . .	230
2.	Underhill . . .	200
3.	Hawley	197
4.	Tarling	180
5.	Thompson . . .	60

And the others are nowhere. We have won a glorious victory, I say, and the reign of terror and ignorance is over. Hip! hip!——'

But before he could get the last word out of his mouth the little crowd broke into a ringing and lusty cheering, which might have been

heard by Parson Ellison in the rectory half-a-mile away.

* * * * *

In Woodleigh that night the joy of Heaven and the rage of Pandemonium were seen in miniature. In the 'Green Dragon' Thompson and his set, glutted with drink, were gnashing their teeth and swearing vengeance on all who had opposed them; but in the village chapel the Methodists were gathered in thanksgiving. Simeon Tandy stood within the communion-rail and led the people in prayer. And Jethro D. Hawley this time was in their midst.

John
Oakey's
Christmas
Box

JOHN OAKEY'S CHRISTMAS BOX

CHAPTER I

THE winter of 18— was such an unusually severe one that it was impossible to get away from Woodleigh for the Christmas holidays. For a whole fortnight we were prisoners, and hemmed in on all sides like a besieged city, the only difference being that our enemy was not the 'Proosians,' who had, only a short time ago, raised the siege of Paris, but the great snow of that year. We afterwards learned that the storm had been general throughout the country ; but it is one thing, from the window of a house in the city, to watch the snow fall on to the streets where the municipal authorities provide an army of efficient workers, armed with brushes and shovels, ready to pounce down upon the lightest fall, and to sweep and cart it away as speedily as possible,

and quite another to see the snow fall in the village, which is situated in the heart of an agricultural county, five miles remove from everywhere, and to know and feel that every flake falls to lie on the ground, perhaps for weeks, and to block all exit from or entrance to the village. At such times, life in a country village is not the paradise some sentimental folk fondly imagine it, and to be cut off from all communication with the outer world, to hear nothing of all that is therein occurring, whether the nations are at peace or war; never to see a newspaper or a postman—and there are no telegraph wires, remember—well, that is an experience, so far as I am concerned, to which the poetasters, who write dainty sonnets to the periodicals in praise of the primitive quiet of village life, are welcome.

Snow came suddenly and unexpectedly that year. The night of the storm I was sitting, in the ingle-nook in Farmer Oakey's kitchen, chatting pleasantly and never dreaming of such a thing as a snowstorm. The day had been cold but clear, and the sodden clouds which had gathered as the day waned raised no suspicions in my mind of what they portended. I do not think they disturbed the peace of a single soul in Woodleigh either, though Sam'l

Pryce said 'as how he knowed what was coming when he saw 'em.' But that was after the event.

'So yo' be goin' on yo'r holidays to-morrer?' John Oakey queried, during a moment's pause in the conversation.

'Yes, to-morrow night, all being well, I shall be at home.'

'Or,' laughed the good-natured farmer, for he dearly loved a joke, 'wi' th' missus that is to be?'

'An' why not, John Oakey?' put in his buxom spouse; 'it be better'n forty year now sin' yo' an' me set out t'gether, an' if us wur to live anoöther forty year, which howsomever cannot be, Ah could never forget th' happy days when yo' cam' coörtin' o' me.

'Ah doant mean to say as how 'em days wur better days than th' days an' years o' happy wedlock, John, for sin' us wur married Ah've never had a single regret, but then yo' know coörtin' time be coörtin' time, an' coörtin' must be done afore weddin', as there be precious lil'l time for't afterwards.

'Yo' see,' Mrs Oakey went on, turning to me, for I had expressed my strong dissent from her views, 'there be th' daily work in th' house which must be 'tended to, an' which keeps a woman at it from mornin' to night, so that there

be no time for love-makin'. Ah know as how some foak think there be no need for't after marriage, but Ah knows better, an' many a time Ah've sighed for just a wee word when Ah've bin down in th' dumps an' pressed aboöve measure wi' care an' trouble; but there ha' bin no time for't, an' Ah never knew a good housewife yet what had a moment to spare for hersel'.

'Yo' see, when all be done what ha' to be done, there be still summat wantin'. Ah know well enough that th' men work hard, too, an' toil all day about th' farm or in th' fields, but 'em gets done sometimes, an' nothin' pleases us better'n to see 'em restin' a bit. But a woman's work be never done, an' there be no times o' restin' for her. 'Specially after th' childer begin to coom. Us ha' had eleven o' em'; five o' 'em be 'neath th' sod in Cleeve Churchyard now, fower o' 'em be in furrin' pairts, includin' Henery, who us ha'n't seen or heard o' for twenty years; one o' 'em, Oliver, be still wi' us on th' farm, an' Mary be married to William Gregory, th' market gardener ower to Bycombe. There was summat to do rarin' such a big family, Ah can tell yo', an' th' work 'em brought wi' 'em can never be told, to say nothin' o' th' worl' o' care an' anxiety 'em

caused, 'specially Henery. An' what wi' the poultry, th' milkin', an' th' dairy, th' househol' duties, an' th' care o' all th' childer, Ah'm sure there wasn't a moment to be given to coörtin'.'

'You speak regretfully?' I ventured.

'No, not a lil'l bit o' it. Ah may speak wi'out reserve, but Ah'd go ower it all again wur Ah young once more, even though m'eyes wur opened to what Ah now knows; not all th' care, an' work, an' worry 'ud keep me from startin' out again wi' John. But what Ah say to yo' be, Mak' th' most o' yo'r coörtin' time while it lasts.'

There was a touch of pathos in 'Liza Oakey's words which found its way to my heart, but I turned it off with a laugh, and said that I would do my best to follow out such congenial advice.

For that Christmastide, however, Fate willed otherwise.

When I left Farmer Oakey's house that evening, snow had begun to fall. 'Who would have thought it!' I cried, as I bade John Oakey good-night at his door. 'There wasn't a sign of such a thing when I came in an hour ago.'

The farmer stepped out on to the garden path and stood awhile viewing the heavens.

'Sky appears thick o' it,' he said. 'Shouldn't be at all surprised if us do ha' a goodish fall.'

Mr Oakey's prognostications proved terribly true.

Next morning, when I drew up my blind and looked out, an appalling sight met my eyes. The pure, white snow lay thick and heavy on all the landscape, and was still falling. Not a vestige of hedge or bush was to be seen; even the boundary wall which separated the school premises from Farmer Oakey's orchard had gone down beneath the dense mass, while the orchard itself was completely obliterated. The slopes of the Cotswolds were a good half-mile away, and several fields lay between them and the school-house, but they seemed very near that morning, and, if one could only have trodden on the snow so lightly as not to sink, not a single obstruction —gateway, hedge, or anything else—would have barred the clear way to their slopes. The stillness resting over all, too, but added effect to the fearsomeness of the scene, and caused a chilling lonesomeness to strike the heart. There was no bleating of sheep on the hillsides, no pleasing lowing of cattle in the meadows, no cackling of fowls in the farmyards, or clanking of milk-cans, sounds usual and peculiar to Woodleigh; but instead, an awful oppressive hush, relieved only by an occasional puff of

wind that blew the snow with a gentle swish against the window-panes.

That was the view from the bedroom window, but downstairs there was absolutely no view at all. When I flung open the front door, a great mass of snow tumbled into the doorway, almost smothering me, but the block outside still reached up to the knocker. With no better implement than the fire-shovel, it took a full hour that morning to cut a way down to the gate, leaving the snow piled up in huge masses on either side of the narrow path.

'Good-mornin',' some one called to me, as I paused awhile at the gate to view the block in the road, while the sweat streamed from my temples and ran down my cheeks; 'Good mornin', didna Ah say it wur a-coomin'?'

It was John Oakey's voice, but his form I could not see. I looked about for him in vain, and then I heard him laugh heartily.

'Eh! mon, Ah be here,' he cried; 't'other side o' th' road. Ah'm lookin' down 'pon yo' from th' top o' this 'ere bank o' snow.'

It was now my turn to laugh.

'Yes; I see you now. Rather—I see your hat and your eyes. What are you doing?'

'Diggin' m' way through to yo'. Th' drift

roun' th' scheul-house be summat awful. Mrs Oakey wouldna rest till Ah got some o' th' men to help me to dig yo' out. There be fower o' us 'ere hard at work, an' us'll rescue yo' soon.'

I listened, and now I could hear the men's spades cutting their way into the snow with a swishing sound.

'There ull be no chance o' yo'r gettin' away from Woodleigh this Christmas,' said John Oakey.

'Nonsense,' I laughed, 'I would go through fire and water.'

'But not six miles through snow three feet deep an' ten in th' drifts.'

'Is it so bad as that?' I asked, aghast.

'There ha' bin nothin' like it sin' '45,' replied John Oakey, 'when us wur blocked oop 'ere for a whole month an' could not get even so far as Cleeve.'

In a little time the men had cut their way to where I was standing.

'Yo' must just lock oop th' scheul-house,' said John Oakey, 'an' coom along o' me ower to th' farm . . . No, Ah'm to tak' no 'xcuses. It be missus's express orders. An' besides, what can a lonely man like o' yo' do 'ere wi' yo'rsel' at such times as these? If yo' doant coom, then Ah'm to use main force. . . . Yo' be laughin' at that, but it

ull be no laughin' matter, Ah can tell yo'. Coom now. . . . Yo' ull be bound to spen' yo'r Christmas in Woodleigh, an' why not wi' us as well as wi' onybody else? Coom; if yo' doant mak' a start Thomas Tarling or some other o' th' frien's ull be 'ere to claim yo', an' Ah think oor claim cooms first, sin' us ha' rescued yo'. . . .'

John Oakey was a born diplomatist. It was impossible to resist such kindly overtures, and so I locked up the school-house, and for company's sake and good cheer, went to spend the Christmastide with the Oakeys.

CHAPTER II

'It be a good job th' Christmas-boxes cam' afore th' snow,' said John Oakey at breakfast that morning, 'or belike us should ha' had to wait for 'em till Christmas had gone by.'

''Em would ha' coom afterwards, at ony rate, so that it ud be as broad as long,' said Mistress Oakey.

'Yes,' said her husband, 'but 'em wouldna ha' bin seasonable.'

'Mine haven't come at all,' said I, playfully.

'P'raps yo' didna 'xpect ony.'

'No, I can't say as I did.'

'Ah well!' said John Oakey.

'What! Did you really expect yours?' I asked in surprise.

'Ah 'xpected a cheque for twenty poond.'

'Then I hope you got it,' I said, laughing.

'Yes,' he answered quietly, reaching an envelope from the mantelshelf, 'Ah got it all right,

—and he showed me the cheque. 'It cam' yesterday morn.'

'My!' I whistled; 'and was it faith that brought it? I think I must try what expecting will do for me.'

'Well,' said John Oakey, laughingly, 'it be th' 'xpectin' soul that gets th' blessing. That be sound doctrine, baint it?'

'It would appear so. But in spiritual so in material things,' I said, 'there ought to be some good ground of hope.'

For a moment John Oakey sat silent.

'All th' groun' o' hope us ha',' he said presently, 'be that a similar cheque ha' coom reg'lar ev'ry Christmas for eleven year now.'

'An' on oor birthdays,' said Mistress Oakey.

'Yes, an' on oor birthdays; a cheque for twenty poonds cooms as sure th' days.'

'But you know who sends them?'

For answer, John Oakey handed me the envelope, and pointed to the crest on the back.

'Gabbs, Perkins, & Gabbs, Solicitors,' was what I read aloud, and then gazed wonderingly from the farmer to his wife.

'Some relation o' oors abroad be all us do know,' said John Oakey.

'Some relation us ha' never seen,' further

explained Mistress Oakey; 'but th' money ha' coom in handy mony an' mony a time.'

''Specially in th' year o' th' cattle disease,' said her husband. 'Mebbe yo' doant 'member it? Us ull ha' need to 'member it all oor lives long. Nearly all th' cows died in th' fields that year—'

'All but six heifers,' explained Mistress Oakey.

'Yes; ninety-one in all, an' ower three hunder sheep. Aye, it wur a touch an' go wi' us that year, an' bankruptcy and roöin stared us in th' face, when what should come by post one mornin' but a cheque for a hunder poond!'

I could not help uttering an exclamation of surprise.

'From this same unknown relative?'

'Yes—it wur just like's if un had known oor loss an' trouble,' said Mistress Oakey, wiping her eyes.

'An' if it hadna bin for that timely help us ha' had to ha' sold all an' left th' old farm.'

John Oakey's eyes were glistening with tears as he recalled this touching incident in his life, and there was something to do with my own which I attributed to a cold in the head, as I wiped them with my handkerchief.

'And you have never seen this relative?' I repeated, for something better to say.

'Never.'

'Why,' I said, 'it is quite as mysterious a thing as the blankets and the Christmas dinners I have heard so much about. Surely this unknown benefactor cannot be one and the same person?'

John Oakey shook his head emphatically, and the reasons he gave me for so doing were quite sufficient justification for it.

Night came on. It was Christmas Eve. We were sitting round the huge fire, the great yule-log blazing merrily on the hearthstone in the open fireplace, and crackling and sparkling joyously. Janet Thornbury and Ellen Tarling came in.

'Isn't this awful weather!' cried Mrs Tarling, in her usual gushing style. 'I am afraid it will spoil our meeting.'

Ellen Tarling referred to the annual tea-meeting and sacred concert held in the school-room every Christmas night in Woodleigh.

'Ah shouldn't think so,' said John Oakey; 'foak ull coom out all right if it be on'y for th' sake o' th' petticoats an' blankets.'

'And that is just the very thing which has

brought us here,' said Mrs Tarling, turning to me. 'We want you to officiate.'

'Me!' I cried in consternation.

'Yes; there will be none of th' ministers out from Spaton in this, and we must rely upon oor own efforts.'

'What have I to do?'

'You shall learn all that in due time. There will be no lack of prompters.'

'An' what about th' turkeys?' asked John Oakey. ''Em oughter ha' bin given out to-day.'

'To-day! It is a mercy they were not left until to-day. Thomas did it yesterday. How many do you think?'

'Summat near fifty.'

'Sixty-seven.'

'What!' I cried, 'sixty-seven families provided with a turkey?'

'Yes.'

'And all the gifts of this unknown friend?'

'All from Woodleigh's good angel.'

'If for nothin' else,' said John Oakey, in a fine latitudinarian spirit, 'he ull one day wear an angel's crown for this.' And then we fell to talking about a score of things—of Christmases long gone by, of the goodwill and peace of the festive time of the year, of Christmas reunions,

and of the happy meetings of scattered members of families gathered round one fireside.

But it was I and the women who talked. From that moment a strange silence fell upon John Oakey, and, beyond a few occasional words, his contributions to our joyous talk were *nil.*

'It ull be very lonely wi' us this Christmas,' said Mistress Oakey; 'Oliver be th' on'y one o' th' eleven wi' us.'

'Yes,' said Janet Thornbury, 'Mary will not be able to get ower from Bycombe in this.'

Mistress Oakey shook her head sadly. 'An' th' others be all in Ameriky,' she said.

John Oakey in the ingle-nook heaved a heavy sigh.

'Well, well,' said Mrs Oakey, 'John an' me be gettin' old now, an' us mustn't 'xpect anythin' else now. Us must just draw oor chairs t'gether roun' th' fire like us did afore th' childer cam'. Us wur all in all to each other in those days, an' there was none to coom atween us, an' it on'y be goin' back to th' beginnin' again.'

John Oakey looked up, and there was a mist in his eyes. 'An' us could be contented an' happy in so doin',' he said, 'if—if—' and his utterance grew choked, 'if us wur sure that th' childer——'

He stopped abruptly, his face growing pale with sudden excitement.

'Look! he gasped, pointing to the window, '*Henery!*'

We looked, but saw nothing.

'Dad!' exclaimed Mistress Oakey, 'be yo'r wits takken leave o' yo'?'

'Yon was Henery's face at th' window,' he said emphatically, and we all rose and followed him to the door.

But no one was to be seen without, and a solemn stillness reigned over all.

'Ah must ha' bin mistakken,' he said at length, in a disappointed tone.

'O' coorse yo' must,' said his wife.

'It wur wi' thinkin' about un, an' m' fancy must ha' deceived me.'

''Xcept,' said Mrs Oakey, herself growing superstitious, ''xcept it be a token.'

But John Oakey scouted that idea, and went in and drew down the blind.

'Us had best get to bed,' he said, when at length our visitors had gone. 'Wull yo' read?'

'What shall it be?' I asked, opening the big Bible which lay on the table near. 'About the birth of Christ?'

'Not to-night,' he said; 'read that to-morrow. Turn to the seventy-third Psalm.'

I did so wonderingly, and then we knelt in prayer. John Oakey himself prayed, and this was the tenor of his prayer :—

'Do good to those who do good, O Lord. . . . Give length o' days an' blessin' an' honour to th' unknown frien' who so kindly mak's Christmas 'ere a time o' joy to th' poor o' oor beloved Woodleigh. . . . Have mercy 'pon th' fatherless an' th' widow, th' homeless an' th' outcast. . . . Look down wi' compassion 'pon those what ha' wandered from their father's God, an' who be in exile an' in sin. . . . Deal gently wi' th' errin' sons an' daughters o' Thy people, for Thy Name's sake. . . . 'Specially 'member wi' lovin' kindness him what be on oor hearts this night, oor dear boy Henery; A'mighty Father, bless him, an' all th' other childer what Thou hast given us. . . .'

Almost all men have a skeleton in their cupboard which they jealously guard from the cold, cynical eye of the world, but no one could have guessed from mere observation that John Oakey, too, had one under lock and key. His jovial face, ever beaming kindly, and his unvarying good humour, were no indices of the

trouble and fret within his heart, a harrowing, wearing trouble of twenty years' duration.

That skeleton in the cupboard was no other than the trouble about 'Henery.'

CHAPTER III

'HENERY'S' was a name rarely mentioned in Woodleigh. Twenty years had passed away since he had left the neighbourhood, and he was as a man forgotten or dead. Occasionally, however, I had heard a whisper about him.

'Henery Oakey was nothin' but a lazy loon an' a great blackguard,' Gossip Reeves had once told me. 'He wur th' wickedest man in Woodleigh, an' was allus either brawlin' an' fightin' at th' "Green Dragon," or disturbin' th' peace o his father's home.

'John Oakey baint the man he once wur, not by any means, an' th' deep furrows on his brow wur all scored there by Henery. . . . Ha' yo' never noticed th' scar ower John Oakey's left eye? It wur Henery what did that one night when he cam' home drunk. . . . Summat his father said angered him, an' he oop wi' his fist an' struck his father to th' groun'; in fallin' John Oakey's head cam' in contact wi' th' step

o' th' door, an' that's how he gotten his mark.

'Oh! yes. Henery was sorry 'nough for it afterwards, but where be th' use o' bein' sorry when th' mischief be done? Bein' sorry for a thing doant mak' it better once it be done. Nothin' can mak' a wrong thing right, an' John Oakey ull carry that scar on his face to his dyin' day.

'Yo' never heard how Henery cam' to go away from Woodleigh? . . . *He had to go away*, that be th' long an' short o' it,' and Gossip Reeves shook her head meaningly. 'He had to cut it quick and fly. . . . It wur a poachin' job. There was no reason in th' worl' for it, for Henery's father had plenty . . . It wur just his devilment. . . . . Ah've heard foaks as do say as how John Oakey do maintain that there was never no harm in Henery, an' as how he on'y poached through love o' sport an' darin', but there be 'em what knows better.

'No; Henery Oakey daren't coom back to Woodleigh again; he ud be clapped into gaol th' day he did. There be a warrant out for un, an' though it be twenty years sin' it wur out, a warrant be a warrant, Ah tak' it, an' hol's good to th' crack o' doom.

'Hadna it bin for th' shootin', squire might ha' forgiven un for th' poachin', but not for th' shootin'. Jake Cress walks lame to this day wi' it, an' it wur on'y o' God's mercy that un wurn't kilt. . . . Some said as how Henery fired d'liberate an' straight at Jake's heart, an' that be a story like 'nough, for Henery was as a madman when roused, though others did say as how it all wur a pure axident. But whether it wur or whether it wurn't, Jake got th' shot in his thigh, an' he ha' never bin th' same man sin'.'

Thomas Tarling, too, had once mentioned the matter to me.

'It be th' one bitter drop in John Oakey's cup. He could be content at never seein' Henery again if so be that he on'y knowed that un had reformed ; but there, Ah s'pose he ull never know now. . . . Mebbe it be best, for Henery was ever a headstrong lad, an' a child o' th' devil. Not but that Ah knows th' vilest may be forgiven an' turn ower a new leaf, but Henery Oakey had never ony inclination for religion.

'No ; Ah doant s'pose un be dead, though a reckless young fellow like he wur might ha' kilt hissel' by this time wi' drink, but in th' true coörse o' nature Henery baint dead ; he ud be a man about in th' prame o' life by now.

'No; Ah doant s'pose there be a soul in Woodleigh as knows his whereabouts: in Ameriky some used to say, an' others that un had never gone ony farther away than Lunnon; but my private opinion all along ha' bin that he be in Australy at th' goöld-diggin's.'

'Then there is a probability of his having grown a rich man?'

Thomas Tarling shrugged his shoulders. 'More probability,' he said, 'o' his havin' turned out a robber or a murderer.'

John Oakey and I sat up late that night watching the yule-log grow red on the hearthstone. The other members of the family had gone to bed directly the prayers were over, and we were alone. For a long time we sat together in silence. Our thoughts were busy. Mine were recalling the words Gossip Reeves and Thomas Tarling had spoken months ago, and contrasting them with the beautiful spirit manifested by John Oakey that night in his prayer. He had not given up hope for his son's redemption, and, though all the world was against the exile, the father's heart still clung to him.

Suddenly, as we sat there, a sound of singing from without fell upon our ears.

'The Waits,' said John Oakey, lifting up his head and looking into my face, and then we sat with hushed breath to listen. 'Hark, the herald angels sing' was the song that came floating in to us on the still air, and I thought I had never heard anything so sweet and beautiful in my life. I glanced at John Oakey. Glistening tears were trickling down his honest face.

'It do mind me o' Henery,' he said presently, 'when he wur but a lil'l lad in th' Sabbath Scheul. . . . He allus went a-singin' wi' th' carollers at Christmas-time. . . . He had one o' th' sweetest voices th' good Lord ever gave to a child. . . . Eh! it wur a treat to hear un, his clear treble soundin' out aboöve all th' rest o' the koyer. . . . 'Em wur happy times, happy times. 'Liza an' me often do wish us had 'em ower again, wi' all th' childer wee things ower again roun' oor own fireside.'

'God will certainly hear your prayer for your lad,' I said, with choking voice, for my heart was full of pity to bursting; it was so touching a thing to see so strong a man bowed down with his grief.

'He wouldna be my God if He didna, not th' God Ah've allus loved an' trusted for ower sixty year. Na, na; He 'ull never fail me. . . . Ah

knows as there be those what thinks He will, though 'em doant say it in so many words, but 'em doant know th' pledge Ah had from Him ower twenty years agone — one Ah've never ceased to urge at th' Throne o' Grace every night sin' then. . . . Some think Ah've no claim 'pon God, an' that Henery ha' clean wiped out his'n. But that ha' allus 'peared th' strangest o' doctrines to me, an' it baint neither Methodist or Christian. . . . It ud be a strange thing if a man what had served his Maker to th' best o' his pore ability, an' what had washed his hands in innocency, had no claim 'pon God. Ah can't believe it, and Ah never will. . . . But Ah doant set oop ony claim other than m' own helplessness, an' Ah do think that be 'nough to draw down th' pity an' help o' m' Father. . . . Baint Him a God full o' compassion an' tender mercy, an' ud it be like Him to pass by m' brokken heart? An earthly father might, but th' Heavenly never, never, never, never, never! Muster Todd did say as how there be five blessed nevers i' th' promise. . . . Ah ull get a tokken for good yet afore Ah go hence and be no more. . . . Mebbe,' and John Oakey's voice trembled with emotion, 'Ah ull never see oor Henery again in this life, but Ah ull see un at God's right hand . . . o'

that Ah've no shadder o' doubt; th' good God ull never 'low th' flesh o' His servant's loins to go down into th' pit.'

The singing in the distance without had ceased while we had been talking, but now, just under our window, we could hear the shuffling of feet in the snow, and the low, cautious murmuring of voices. Then, in an undertone, we could hear the leader of the choir count, 'One—two—three,' and the next moment 'Christians, awake!' rose sweetly on the wings of the early morning air.

John Oakey and I sat motionless, listening with full hearts while the carol was sung—motionless and listening while several were sung, until at last came the parting hymn,

'Sleep on, beloved, sleep and take your rest.'

This time the choir sang with subdued voices, as of a tender mother rocking her precious babe to sleep upon her breast. But there was one voice that trilled out above all others, one voice trembling with pathos and of exceeding sweetness. From the first note it captured our hearts, and thrilled them with unspeakable feeling, so that we rose together shaking from head to foot with emotion. But when the carol singers reached the line, 'We love thee well, but Jesus

loves thee best,' the sweet singer's voice broke down in an audible sob, and no longer took the lead.

John Oakey clutched my arm excitedly. I knew what he was thinking about, but the thing was impossible. Nevertheless, I went with him to the door, and spoke a few words of festive greeting to the carrollers.

'Who is the charming singer you have with you to-night?' I asked of one of the choir.

'A stranger in Woodleigh,' was the answer, 'Simeon Tandy's frien'.'

And then I remembered that a stranger had come the day before to spend the Christmas with Simeon.

CHAPTER IV

NEXT morning we trudged through the snow to chapel, the bells of Cleeve Church ringing cheerily in the distance and all the air palpitating with the unseen angels' song.

Good old Simeon Tandy occupied the pulpit and preached from the words, 'Go search diligently for the young child,' and, even for him, it was a sermon of unusual power and unction. But I confess that my whole attention was taken up with the stranger in Simeon's pew. There was something about the man's face which seemed familiar to me, and, though I was conscious that I had never seen him before, yet there was something which I could not fix or define. I found myself stealing sidelong glances at him all through the service. What struck me, too, as a most remarkable thing about him was his silence when we sang. That a man with so rich a voice as his—a man with evidently a passion for singing—should be silent at so special a

time seemed mysterious to me to the last degree.

The sermon over, Simeon opened the hymn-book, and stood awhile looking round upon the little congregation with a face betraying strong agitation within. His eyes were full, and his mouth twitched strangely. Twice he essayed to speak, and twice he failed. We were astonished beyond measure, and sat in breathless sympathy. But at last his tongue was loosened.

'Ah've a frien' wi' me this day in this house o' God whom it does my heart good to see 'mongst us again. . . . It be ower twenty years sin' us met afore an' worshipped in this same chapel . . . he wur nothin' but a slip o' a lad then . . . God knows Ah never 'xpected to see him again . . . Ah wanted un to preach, but Ah couldna persuade un, though he be a local in his own circuit ower in Australy. . . . He be on'y 'ere on a flyin' visit . . . just to look 'gain 'pon some o' th' old faces o' his youth. . . . Will yo' forgive me, dear frien's, if Ah change th' hymn, an' ask yo' to sing Number 478 i'stead? . . . after which Ah ull just ask m' frien' to lead us in prayer.'

Somehow I felt that a crisis was approaching,

but I could neither move nor speak. John Oakey's face, too, was strangely agitated, but he sat with fixed eyes upon the preacher.

'Fower hunder an' seventy-eight,' said Simeon:

'And are we yet alive,
And see each other's face?
Glory and praise to Jesus give
For His redeeming grace!'

No pen could possibly describe the strong feeling that filled all our hearts as we sang this well-known verse, and therefore I will not try to describe it, but the climax of feeling was reached when we came to the second part of it. Instead of Simeon giving out the next four lines, the stranger himself, from the back pew of the chapel, commenced:

'Preserved by power Divine
To full salvation here,
Again in Jesu's name we join,
And in His sight appear.'

But he never got to the end of it. From the first word his voice was choking, and before he had finished the second line, he broke down altogether.

I saw John Oakey at my side stagger as if he would fall, but the next moment a great cry escaped him.

'*Henery! My son!*' he exclaimed, hastening from our pew to where the stranger stood.

'*Father!*' was the next word I heard, and then the two men fell upon each other's necks in tears.

Woodleigh never witnessed such a scene before or since. Lucy Stallard's home-coming was as nothing to it. But when it was noised abroad that Woodleigh's good angel was none other than Henry Oakey, the man who had been reprobated and abandoned by all, and who had been cut off from the prayers of even God's people—when it became known that it was this same man who had secretly, during the past ten years, cheered so many homes and brought so much blessing and comfort to so many firesides, the one thing feared by the good men of the place was that the people, in their great wonder and thankfulness, might sin in worshipping him.

'And what if they did?' Jethro Hawley said to a group one night in his shop. 'For myself, I'm inclined to think him worthy of it, quite as worthy as any of the world's heroes.'

The Backslider

THE BACKSLIDER

I

BEYOND THE PALE

THERE was a man 'ower to Bycombe' who, for twenty years and more, had been one of the best known and best loved men in the Spaton circuit, but who, in an evil moment, had fallen from grace, and had thus brought himself into disfavour and disrepute from one end of the circuit to the other. His name was Isaiah Tomkyns, and in his time he had filled many important offices in the church of his upbringing, being Sabbath School teacher, class-leader, and local-preacher at the time of his fall. In his capacity as local-preacher, he had been one of the most acceptable brethren on the plan, and deservedly so. For upwards of twenty years his influence throughout the circuit had been marvellous, and everywhere men congregated

to hear him preach. 'Like a flaming fire' was the usual description of his pulpit power.

But when Isaiah Tomkyns fell from grace, none of these things was counted to his gain, but rather to his disadvantage. His past services were only mentioned to justify the damnation meted out to him, and he was shunned as a leper.

'If un hadn't knowed better Ah could ha' forgiven un,' was a frequent comment when the poor unfortunate fellow's case was mentioned in conversation.

'A man what ha' preached th' gospel to others merits th' lowest hell when un brings th' blessed gospel into ridicule as Isaiah ha' done,' others said.

'He ha' sinned 'gainst light an' reason, an' what mercy can e'en A'mighty God show to such an one!'

'Isaiah ha' crucified th' Son o' God afresh an' put Him to an oopen shame!'

So Isaiah's class-book was taken from him, and his name struck off the plan.

Now, if you who read this story know anything of Methodism, the simple statement of Isaiah's punishment has at once cut like cold steel to your heart and made it bleed for him;

but if you know nothing of Methodism, suffice it to say that no punishment is so keenly felt, and none so degrading or humiliating. This man's hair turned 'white in a single night' because of it, and, from being a man vigorous and noble-looking, in less than a month he became a complete wreck of his old self,—a man haggard, decrepit, and broken.

It is not necessary for the purposes of this story that Isaiah's particular sin should be indicated. There are degrees in sin as there are in most things, but no sin can be so great as to shut a man out of hope of God's mercy. Be content to be told that Isaiah's sin was grievous, and that the sentence meted out to him was just and righteous. Even he himself concurred in it.

'Nay, Mary Ann,' he said resignedly to his wife, when she railed against the severity of it, ''em could ha' done no other. Doant add to th' bitterness o' m' lot by chargin' th' brethren wi' injustice.'

'But twenty years, Isaiah! Ha' 'em no mem'ry o' that, an' no bowels o' compassion?'

''Em ha' acted for th' gospel's sake, an' th' honour o' th' Church . . . it ud be an outrage on decency, an' an insult to th' truth for a man

guilty o' flagrant sin to stan' oop again in th' pulpit. . . . Ah couldna do it, Mary Ann, Ah couldna do it.'

Such was the substance of Isaiah's concurrence, only drawn from him, however, by the indignant protestations of his wife. And, in effect, this was also the judgment of every one in the circuit. But no one, not even Isaiah himself, could have suspected all it meant for him.

It must not be supposed, however, that, because Isaiah had fallen, he had parted with all his goodness. There is an innate nobility in almost every man that triumphs at times over even his purposed and persistent wrong-doing. Even in the worst, there remains a residuum of goodness, and such a thing as total depravity belongs only to perdition. But Isaiah had more than a mere residuum of goodness. That he admitted the justice of his punishment was surely something; that he put the honour of the gospel above all other considerations was surely still more; and that he shrank from ever again taking part in holy work still more to his credit. And, added to all this, was a sense of deep shame and contrition, the former leading him to hide himself from

men, and the latter causing him to cry out night and day in an agony to God. But of these things men knew little, and Isaiah was commonly looked upon as one altogether lost to goodness, a sinner wholly undone, and beyond the pale of mercy.

Of course, as good Methodists, there was not a person throughout the circuit who would have agreed to this judgment of the historian. Every soul of them heartily believed in the doctrine of Universal Salvation, and it was the perennial theme of every pulpit. The preacher who did not put that doctrine prominently forward in every sermon and in every gospel address, might at once cease to preach; people would not have listened to the man who neglected the proclamation of this cardinal truth,—Salvation for all, whoever they were and whatever their characters, 'none need despair, for Christ hath died!' That was the chief doctrine insisted upon and reiterated from every pulpit every Sabbath, so that, if chance led some already 'half-damned' sinner into the service, hearing it, he might embrace the hope of mercy and make his peace with God.

But such breadth and generosity towards those who were outcasts and aliens from the

commonwealth of Israel were often withheld from those who, having once tasted of spiritual things, turned aside into sin again, and Isaiah Tomkyns was no exception to this barbaric treatment. He was looked upon as one past redemption, and *anathema maranatha*. Perhaps the good foak in the Spaton circuit would not have admitted this either; nay, it is probable that they would have warmly contested it, and declared emphatically their confident belief in the way being still open to Isaiah to again win the favour of God; but they did nothing to make the way of return easy to the backslider, and it was in consideration and kindness to the fallen that they were found wanting. Good Christians as they were, they were as faulty as the first disciples. Their hearts were not big enough, nor their sympathies sufficiently wide, to go after the lost sheep until they had found it and brought it back to the fold, and Isaiah for the most part was left severely alone—shunned and avoided.

There is scarcely need to explain that Isaiah felt all this keenly.

'Ah know Ah deserve it,' he said to his wife one day, when she had been consoling with him, 'but Ah'd never ha' thought it o' 'em. . . . Ah

did think 'em would ha' showed me a lil'l sympathy. Ah think Ah could bear ony punishment . . . aye, Ah'd gladly submit to ony . . . but th' slightin' o' old frien's; that do wound m' spirit aboöve all.

'Some o' 'em Ah went to school wi' . . . us wur boys t'gether, an' ha' growed oop to man hood side by side. . . . Ah didna think these would ha' left me thus alone . . . wi'out one word o' sympathy. Ah thought 'em would ha' coom to me, an' said, "Isaiah, yo' ha' done a terr'ble wrong . . . but doant forget there be yet mercy in God . . ." That's what Ah would ha' done had it bin 'em; Ah couldna ha' done ony other . . . an' it be th' teachin' o' th' gospel.

'There baint a single frien' left me now.'

'Doant Ah count for onything, Isaiah?'

Isaiah lifted his downcast head, and looked into his wife's face.

'Yes, for all th' worl' now, Mary Ann,' he said, 'but Ah've no claim to count 'pon e'en yo'r frien'ship. . . . Ah've forfeited m' claim, an' Ah've dragged yo' down into my disgrace.'

She placed her hand suddenly over his mouth.

'Hush!' she said imperatively, 'how dare yo'! . . . What ull yo' say nex'? Wurn't it for

better or for worse us wed? An' what o' worse ha' us had 'till now? Hasna it all bin for th' better durin' these twenty years past? Eh! Isaiah, Ah'm surprised at yo', to think as how one slip could wipe out all th' treasured-up joys o' th' past . . . Not a score o' slips, not a hundred, could ever do that. Fie, Isaiah, fie!'

She laid her head upon his shoulder.

'Whoever be agen yo', yo'r wife can never, never change . . . an' her on'y loves yo' more'n ever now that this calamity be coom 'pon yo'. . . . When a woman once gives her heart to a man there be nothin' what can turn her from un . . . nothin', Isaiah; not e'en wur yo' th' biggest sinner out o' hell, which, thank God, yo' baint . . . nothin' could change th' love Ah bear yo' . . . Ah'd love yo' through all.'

And Isaiah soon found that he had other friends, too. Only a few, truly, from out of the former vast number, but they were genuine as pure gold.

Amongst these, Aaron Priestly and Simeon Tandy were foremost. As for Aaron, he was not long in finding his way to Isaiah's house. Bycombe is an inland market-town, six miles away from the nearest railway-station, but Aaron made no difficulty of the distance. He

rode over on horseback and 'chanced' to pull up at Isaiah's door.

'Isn't this where Isaiah Tomkyns lives?' he asked, rapping at the door with his riding whip.

Mrs Tomkyns came to the door with eyes red with weeping, and a face blank with surprise.

'Yes,' she said, in answer to Aaron's question.

'Is he at home?'

'He be in th' garden, sir. Did yo' want to see un?'

'Yes, have th' goodness to call him.'

Mrs Tomkyns had no idea who the horseman was. It was only on very rare occasions indeed that Aaron found his way to Bycombe, such as when the Quarterly Meeting was held there or at chapel re-openings. She had, of course, often heard her husband speak of the circuit steward, but she had never seen him. It was with strange feelings, therefore, and a sinking heart that she went to seek her husband. But her fears were set at rest the moment the stranger and her husband met. The former had dismounted from his horse, and had thrown the reins to a young fellow loitering near.

'Mr Priestly!' exclaimed Isaiah in confusion and surprise.

'How are you, Isaiah, how are you? Do you know what I want?'

'No.'

'A cup of tea,' and Aaron laughed heartily. 'Can you take pity on a poor man? I've ridden over from Spaton on particular business, and a cup of tea would be most refreshing.'

'Ah'm sure yo' be very welcome, Maister Priestly, but—'

'The horse, you mean? Oh, I will soon dispose of him. If you will just get the kettle boiling while I am away, I will take him over to the Crown and get the people there to give him a rub down and a feed. Is it agreed?'

'Yo' honour me in askin',' Isaiah replied, and, after a little good-natured banter, Aaron led the horse away.

Mrs Tomkyns had listened with amazement.

'Be un th' circuit steward?' she asked her husband when Aaron was out of hearing.

Isaiah nodded.

'What be un wantin'?'

'He says he ha' coom ower to Bycombe on particular business.'

'What about?'

'Ah dunno.'

'Doant yo' think un ha' some secret purpose in coömin' 'ere?'

'Ah dunno think so. He spoke 'sif it wur just a chance visit. . . . But get un th' tea ready, Mary Ann; it ull be th' first time us ever had th' circuit steward in oor house.'

An hour afterwards the tea-drinking was all over, and Aaron riding away again. During the hour he had been in the house, he had never once mentioned Isaiah's fall, and had talked as if oblivious of it. But, of everything else happening in the circuit, he spoke freely and talked incessantly. He laughed and joked until even Isaiah had been lifted out of his deep depression and had laughed in return. His vivacity had been simply irresistible and contagious, so that the settled pallor on Mrs Tomkyn's cheeks had for the while been chased away, and a pink tinge of healthy excitement taken its place. And at the door, when in parting, he had crowned all by his warm handshake, and his hearty 'God bless you, Isaiah!'

'Eh!' exclaimed Mrs Tomkyns, as she and her husband stood watching him careering down the long dusty road, until at last he disappeared over the 'broo,' 'yon be a Christian, if ever there wur one.'

Her husband's eyes and heart were full.

'He never once mentioned it,' he said, and she did not need to be told what he meant.

'No, yon be a man wi' a heart in his breast.'

'He at least doesna despise me.'

'He be yo'r frien', Isaiah. Yo' thought yo'r wife wur th' on'y one left, but it baint true while Aaron Priestly do live.'

More than two weeks passed away, however, before Isaiah received another such friendly visit, and by that time deep gloom had again settled on his spirit.

'Ah'm a sinner marked for destruction,' was a frequent plaint of his during these awful days of darkness, and, when his wife remonstrated with him, he would quote to her all the passages of Scripture he could remember bearing upon election and predestination.

'Na, na,' he would say, 'there be no gettin' beyond th' written Word . . . some be born to eternal life and some to everlastin' damnation . . . an' Ah be one o' th' latter, one o' th' latter.'

'But yo' never preached that doctrine, an' it baint Methodist.'

'It be th' Bible . . . an' it must be right. Us ha' preached a lie, us ha' preached a lie!'

'Doant, Isaiah! Yo' do mak' me feel 'sif God wurn't good . . . 'sif He wur a monster o' wickedness.'

'Not e'en God can get beyond His written Word,' Isaiah wailed despondently.

'Isaiah, hanna yo' said mony a time that God wur not a slave to His own laws? Ah've heard yo' preach that!'

'It wur in ignorance . . . an' Ah'm doomed to destruction!'

This was the frame of mind in which Simeon Tandy found him when he 'looked in' a few Sabbaths afterwards on his way to fulfil his appointment at the Bycombe chapel.

'It be wrong o' yo', Isaiah, it be wrong o' yo',' he said reprovingly, when the truth was made known to him, 'an' yo' oughter know better. Yo' be dishonourin' God, Isaiah. Hasna He offered mercy to th' vilest an' to ev'ry one? Coom, man, put on yo'r coat, an' coom wi' me to chapel.'

Isaiah only shook his head in gloomy silence.

'Coom,' urged Simeon, taking him by the arm, 'Ah'm not goin' to ha' yo'r blood 'pon th' skirts o' my garments by 'lowin' yo' to become th' prey o' Satan alt'gether.'

Still Isaiah sat moodily and silent.

'Yo'll coom?' again urged Simeon.

'Ah canna.'

'Why, man?'

''Cause it be on'y goin' ower th' whole thing again.'

'Us'll help yo' ower it, an' th' service o' th' sanctuary ull be a blessin' to yo'.'

Yo' doant know all, Simeon, yo' doant know all. . . . Ah could stan' onything but th' repeated probin' o' th' old wound. That Ah can't stan' . . . it be like a knife in my bones.'

Simeon caught something of his meaning, and his face flushed with strong indignation.

'Who be 'em what probes it?' he asked.

'Who baint 'em?' exclaimed Mrs Tomkyns, taking up the cudgels in her husband's defence, 'There baint a man 'mongst 'em what ull so much as speak to un, now his calamities be coom 'pon un.'

'Nay, Mary Ann, doant be unjust,' said her husband mildly, 'it baint quite so bad as that . . . 'em do speak.'

,Yes,' flashed Mary Ann, 'just th' time o' day, that be all . . . an' there baint one o' 'em what ud stan' two minutes to hold a conversation wi' yo'. Yet there be some o' 'em, Simeon—'

'Hush!' pleaded Isaiah, raising his hand, 'doant, Mary Ann, doant.'

'Doant onyone visit yo'?' asked Simeon.

'Visit!' cried Mrs Tomkyns.

'Circuit steward ha' bin 'ere,' Isaiah explained.

'Maister Priestly?'

'Yes.'

'But th' others, th' chapel-foak 'ere?'

''Em never darken th' door,' replied Mrs Tomkyns bitterly, 'an there baint one o' 'em but what ull cross th' road to avoid un if 'em do see him coomin'. If pore Isaiah wur a leper cryin, "Unclean! Unclean!" un couldna be more shunned.'

Simeon's heart was beating wildly, and the hot blood coursing quickly through his veins. He had never dreamt that his old colleague on the plan had been subject to such unchristian treatment; nay, he had not so much as suspected that there were people in the circuit capable of such guilty conduct. He recalled the story of the man who fell amongst thieves on the road down to Jericho whom the Priest and Levite passed by, and his heart swelled with righteous anger.

'Ah know Ah deserve nothin' better, Simeon, but that doesna mak' it ony easier to bear. . . .

Na, doant ask me, Simeon; Ah can't go. . . . Besides, where be th' use o't? Ah'm a'ready past all hope o' mercy.'

'No!' cried Simeon, 'yo' baint, an' Ah won't ha' yo' say it. Yo' be dishonourin' God.'

'That be what Ah do tell un,' said Mrs Tomkyns, with her apron to her eyes.

'No sin can be blacker,' said Simeon severely, 'an' it be a libel 'pon God's goodness to say such a thing.

'In my opinion it be th' one unpardonable sin. Ah know o' nothin' Christ's blood can't atone for 'xcept it be th' sin o' sayin', "Ah'm past all reach o' His mercy."'

'Mebbe not past God's mercy,' Isaiah ventured to concede.

'Never so long as life lasts,' said Simeon with great emphasis.

'But beyond man's forgiveness, an', if man cannot forgive, how then can Ah hope for God to forgive?'

Simeon was thunderstruck. This was a new thought to him, and a whole sermon flashed through his mind at the mention of it. He stood a moment with a strangely troubled face, and then turned silently towards the door. So full was he of the thought that he seemed to

have suddenly forgotten himself, and it was only the opening of the door that recalled him to himself again. Then, with his hand on the door-latch, he turned once more towards the two disconsolate ones sitting by the fire and said :

'Man ha' no right to refuse what God so freely offers. . . . Who be 'em what would damn when God forgives? . . . 'Em shall be told o' th' wickedness o't this day, an' their faces shall burn wi' confusion an' shame 'cause o't.'

II

RESTORING THE WANDERER

SUCH a scene was never before witnessed in the Bycombe chapel as was witnessed that night. Simeon, roused to holiest indignation, had come to do battle for an immortal soul. He felt that Isaiah Tomkyn's restoration to the favour of God depended upon the word that he should that night speak to the Bycombe people.

After the morning service Simeon had gone home with his host to dinner, but had refused to sit down to table.

'Na,' he had said with deep feeling, 'Ah've a work to do what canna be done on a full stomach. . . There be devils what can on'y be cast out by prayer an' fasting. . . Ah'll just go to my room an' spen' th' time wi' God till evenin'.'

Thus he entered the pulpit that night surcharged with power from on high.

He changed both his text and his subject.

He had come to Bycombe that morning with the intention of preaching at night from the words, 'Our lamps have gone out,' a solemn, heart-searching discourse which had slain the indifference and lukewarmness of scores in other parts of the circuit. But a more timely word was needed that night. He chose two texts, two startling texts, which of themselves at once arrested profound attention:

'*Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.*'

'*Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.*'

Simeon read them slowly, impressively, and with striking effect. Then he paused a moment and looked round upon the hushed congregation. The Fathers in the body sat awed-looking and reverent, and the young men in the gallery leaned forward expectant in their pews.

That the latter text had been the battle-ground of the churches for ages, Simeon recked little. He had come with a new revelation, and at once plunged into his subject.

'Brethren,' he began without any formal introduction, 'if ony o' *yo'* do err from th' truth—*yo'* who be now truly Christian—*yo'* who now love th' Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity—*yo'* what be now pillars o' th' Church—if *yo'* do err from the truth!'

The awe resting on the congregation deepened. The personal style of the address was not lost upon those present, and not a few already began to fidget in their seats.

'Aye, it be possible that th' best may mak' a bad end o' a splendid beginnin', an' that those what ha' bin faithful for half a lifetime fail at last!'

Then he proceeded to buttress this awful doctrine by numerous passages of Scripture, and pointed to the cases of Iscariot, Demas, and others, 'All o' 'em good men once—all o' 'em zealous an' faithful servants,—but all o' 'em what fell! Yea,' he cried, 'it be

> 'With trembling Ah confess,
> A precious soul *may* fall from grace.'

That, in outline, was practically the preacher's first step in his memorable and mighty sermon. Then he turned to the second.

'An' one convert him! Some foaks find it easy

to b'lieve in the conversion o' th' outrageous sinner, but shrink from holdin' out a hand to raise a fallen brother. That wurn't Christ's way; it wur allus th' pore wanderer what He wur most anxious about. An' who be us that us should damn where God pardons?

Woe to th' man what shuts oop his bowels o' mercy 'gainst his errin' brother. Woe to th' man what blocks oop th' road to heaven!'

The strong, intense feeling that filled all hearts in the congregation at this stage cannot be described. But no one moved, and no sound save the preacher's voice was heard. The usual accompanying 'Amens,' and other such exclamations as the people noted with joy the good points of the sermon, were all absent, and the hush upon the place sat like a burden.

'What do Ah mean! Look at th' second tex', *Whosoever sins ye remit.* Can man, yo' say, forgive sins? Sins against himself, certainly. Doant us do it ev'ry day? What do th' Lord's prayer say?—Forgive us oor trespasses as us forgive 'em what trespass 'gainst us. Doant society forgive, doant e'en th' worl' forgive? E'en in English law baint there an element o' mercy—an', brethren, be Christians to deal wi' th' pore backslider more harsh than these? It be th' duty,

aye, an' th' blessèd privilege o' us all to restore th' lost sheep to th' fol'.'

He was drawing nearer to the heart of his subject now, and dealing out sharp thrusts at the consciences of many listening to him.

'Possible to forgive sins! Aye, an' in so doin' to mak' God's forgiveness possible. Yo' mebbe think that unsound doctrine?' Then he leaned over the pulpit, and in a hoarse, impressive whisper said, 'Go an' ask oor sufferin' brother, Isaiah Tomkyns, whether it be sound or not. "When men do not forgive me," he said to me this morning, "how can Ah hope for God's mercy?" Ha' yo' forgiven Isaiah? Ha' yo' taken un by the hand, an' restored un to yo'r confidence an' love? Why, then, be un absent from his 'customed seat in this sanctuary? Baint it 'cause some o' yo' ha' shunned un, an' passed un by like th' Priest an' th' Levite passed by th' Samaritan? . . . . In God's name, cease this hell's work! . . . . an' go to un an' say, "Us ha' forgiven yo', Isaiah; may th' merciful God do th' rest!"'

Simeon ceased, and the silence deepened. A look of consternation and guilt sat on the faces of nearly all present. At any other time, many of those who had been listening would have shown signs of their strong disapproval

of the preacher's words, but their guilt now struck them dumb.

Presently the steward was seen to rise from his seat, and make his way down the long aisle. No one turned their heads to look at him, but every one in the chapel was conscious that he was making his way to the door. Somehow, too, a consciousness of what he was about to do dawned on the people, and the tension of feeling strengthened.

Simeon announced the closing hymn, and the organist, after a pause, commenced the preliminary playing through of the verse. He had scarcely finished when the door at the bottom of the chapel again opened, and the steward was seen to return.

Simeon paused and glanced down at him.

'Well?' his gaze seemed to say, but the steward only quietly resumed his seat.

In the vestry, however, Simeon put his question into words.

'Ha' yo' seen Isaiah?'

The steward shook his head.

'Th' house be all closed oop.'

Simeon looked astounded.

'M' conscience struck me, Simeon, as yo' wur preachin', an' Ah went—'

'To tell un yo' ha' forgiven un?'

'Na, but to ask his forgiveness. Ah've bin th' greatest sinner, an' Isaiah th' sinned against.

'But th' neighbours say as how a carriage cam' ower from Spaton in th' forenoon, an' took both Isaiah an' Mary Ann away.'

'A carriage! Whose?'

'Nay, 'em dunno.'

Investigation, however, proved it to have been Aaron Priestly's carriage, and still later information revealed the fact that Aaron had come to Bycombe insisting upon returning the compliment of the cup of tea to the Tomkyns. The neighbours had heard Isaiah declining the 'gen'l'man's' pressing invitation to step into the carriage, but without the least avail. The stranger had almost bundled him and Mary Ann into the carriage and then driven away.

But the mild delusion of the cup of tea did not deceive the Spaton people, and, when they saw Isaiah and his wife in the circuit steward's pew, Aaron's real design was at once manifest. Instinctively the people knew that Aaron had once more put out his hand to help a fallen brother, and not a few of the leading friends pressed forward to complete the work Aaron had begun.

Isaiah rode home from Spaton that night a different man. His burden was lifted and his heart was free. For the first time for months, he felt that human sympathy was not dead in the world, and dared to lift up his prayer in thanks to God.

But when, on arriving at home, the Bycombe steward, and all the office-bearers of his 'own place,' with Simeon Tandy at their head, met him at his door, all crowding round him, not only to tell him of their forgiveness, but also to seek his, Isaiah could do no more than break into a flood of tears and rush into the house.

The
Woodleigh
Poet

THE WOODLEIGH POET

JETHRO D. HAWLEY was the Woodleigh postmaster, grocer, and general merchant. You could buy almost anything in his shop from a needle to a flat-iron, from a skein of thread to a complete outfit of clothing, or from a pound of bacon to a sirloin of beef. Jethro was a little man with a fine presence and a large head, and, when I knew him, he wore long, flowing whiskers, white as the driven snow, and hair long and heavy as a poet's should be, and but a shade less white than his whiskers. I did not, however, know that he was a poet until one day I received a little impromptu from him when returning a book which he had borrowed from me, and which began with :

> 'I thank you, sir, a thousand times,
> For Lord Macaulay's prose and rhymes.'

which ended with,

> 'Then many thanks for Lord Macaulay,
> From yours, et cetera, J. D. Hawley.'

This naturally whet my curiosity, and the next evening I took the liberty of calling upon the poet at his own house.

I found him seated in a large, luxurious chair in his little parlour behind the shop, smoking, as was also to be expected in a poet, a long church-warden, the blue, curling smoke of which was clouding the room.

'Ah! good evening,' he said, rising to greet me, 'this is an unexpected pleasure, especially after the surly visitor I have just dismissed,' and then, with a merry twinkle in his eye, he added in a low tone, 'Thompson has been here . . . Take this chair. Smoke? . . . No? I *am* surprised. And you a lonely man! Ah! you miss many cloud visions, many weird, fantastic, glorious visions . . . Still, you won't object to me?'

'Not in the least.'

The poet dropped into his easy-chair again, and for a few moments smoked in silent meditation.

'And how do you like these parts?' he asked presently.

'Fairly well,' I replied.

'Beginning to feel yourself at home amongst us?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Doubtless you find us a strange lot?'

'Surely,' I said smiling, 'you don't expect me to answer that question?'

'Well, hardly,' he answered after a moment's thought, and laughed good-naturedly.

'Are you a native of Woodleigh, Mr Hawley? I asked in turn.

'No; Bycombe is my birthplace, but I have lived in Woodleigh for over sixty years.'

'So long as that!'

'Sixty-four years come next January. I was but a little lad when my parents came here, and here I have been ever since.'

'A much longer time than the double of my life,' I said.

'Yes, I should suspect so,' he answered, again laughing.

'You at least, then,' I said banteringly, 'will feel quite settled in these parts?'

He sat musing a few moments before answering.

'Well, no, I can't say that,' removing his pipe;

'I really can't say that I do . . . . The old fire in my heart is not all dead yet. Many of the most cherished dreams of my life lie in ashes, but not all, not all. But,' he added more cheerily a moment afterwards, 'compulsion is no choice. My living is here, you see, and here I suspect I will abide now until they carry me feet foremost to Cleeve Churchyard.

'There was a time in the years that are past when the humdrum life of this village was almost intolerable to me. Its deadness and sameness day after day jarred on my every nerve, and I felt like a bird in a cage. My heart went out for a fuller life, a life with more bustle and excitement in it, and there was nothing here to satisfy my craving. You see every day is alike here, and the only excitement we have is when a travelling show passes through the village on its way to Monksford or Spaton, or when the hounds and the hunters pass through on their way to the chase.'

'There is the School Board,' I ventured to remark, in remembrance of Jethro's exploits at the election, though so strong a yearning for a town life in a poet seemed strange to me beyond expression.

Jethro laughed.

'Well, yes, that is another kind of excitement, I confess, a kind of intellectual stimulus. But it really seems absurd to me at times that I should be spending my strength in everlastingly standing up for popular rights—me, here in this little village with its handful of people, when I might have been doing something bigger and grander in London.'

'You had an ambition that way?'

'Yes, years ago, and, even now when I come to test myself, I find it is not yet altogether dead. Still—you know I write a little to the papers? No?' and he rose and opened his bookcase.

'Your letter of thanks for Macaulay's "Prose and Rhymes" proved your ability to do so,' I said in a complimentary tone, as he turned over the leaves of an old volume of 'Chambers's Journal.'

'There, that is a bit of my work,' he said, a moment afterwards, handing me the volume opened at a short poem on 'Hope Deferred,' which I read quietly through from beginning to end.

'It is really very good,' I said when I had finished reading it. 'Have you done much in this line?'

For answer he went again to the bookcase and brought out a huge scrap-album, pasted over from the first page to the last with scores of cuttings, from newspapers and magazines, of verses and poems on almost every conceivable topic, and all bearing the name of Jethro D. Hawley as the author. Some of the cuttings had long since lost their pristine whiteness, and were faded and sere, but the poet turned to them fondly.

'They represent,' he said to me, 'my life's thought and work. If when I am gone any one ever wishes to know what manner of man Jerthro Hawley was, he will only have to turn to this album; every passion of my soul, every phase of my feelings upon all stirring occasions, all my thoughts on current politics, literature, art, and upon all notable passing events are herein faithfully set down.'

There was a touch of lingering fondness in his tone as he uttered these words, and, though he flung himself back in his easy-chair and blew the blue cloud of smoke upwards with the air of a meditative man, yet I could see that his eyes were moist and that he was strangely stirred.

For a while I sat glancing through the album, he quietly smoking all the time. Some of the

subjects of the poems went a long way back, and seemed like echoes from the dead past to me. There was one poem, very fine and beautifully written, full of sad, pathetic regret at the disappearing of the old stage coach, and, side by side with it, one in praise of the new locomotive, with a dedication to George Stephenson. There was an ode to 'The Men of the Corn League' and a Tennysonian kind of sonnet on the 'Coronation of Victoria.' 'The Reform Bill' ran into sixty lines of verse, and the 'Great Exhibition of '51' would have done credit to more than one poet who has worn the laurel. 'The Fall of Sebastopol' was the spontaneous outburst of a proud and thankful heart at the success of the arms of the allies, while 'In Freedom's Cause' told over again the fight of '70 for the Board Schools, and was prophetic of the future greatness and glory of England to follow it. Besides these more striking poems there were scores of others, some dealing with purely poetic subjects, such as the seasons, the flowers, the stars, human moods and passions; others dealing with natural phenomena, such as storms, earthquakes, floods, cold, heat, snow and rain; others were descriptive of shipwreck, disaster, accident, disease and death; while not

a few were love-sonnets of pretty phases and delicate insinuations.

'Have you ever thought of publishing these poems,—in a collected form, I mean?' I asked, after a while, for, though many of the effusions were of indifferent merit, and not at all up to the level of some of the others, I felt there could be no harm of thus adroitly complimenting an old man and of humouring him in his fancy.

It was a few moments before he answered.

'You ask a question,' he said slowly, 'that ought never to have been asked.'

'Pardon me,' I said, 'I did not intend to hurt your feelings.'

He waved his hand for silence.

'If literature were not dominated by a clique which can either make or unmake a man, your question would have been a needless one to-day. It is not merit,' he went on with growing vigour, 'that gets its due recognition in the literary world; you must make boomers your friends, and then you will soon be in the full swing of popularity, merit or no merit.'

'Then you have published, I take it?'

'Yes, years ago,' he said, and again going to his book-case, he took down a small, thin octavo volume, and placed it in my hands.

'This,' he said, 'I brought out twenty years ago at my own expense, and it met with nothing but ridicule and abuse from the critics. Yes, "A Glo'ster Lad" was the name under which I issued the book,' he explained as he saw me looking at the title-page, 'and my anonymity, thank God, was never discovered. Until this day it has been a deep secret hidden in my own breast.'

'And it shall remain so still so far as I am concerned,' I said warmly, for the old man's confidence impressed me greatly, and I felt my heart go out towards him.

'Nay, nay,' he said; 'it matters little now who knows it. All the abuse in the world would not now affect me, and the fair mind will acknowledge that there is work in that little book which does not deserve it.'

After this we fell to talking of literature in general, and I was amazed at the amount of reading the old man had done in his time. Of modern books he knew little, but 'the old masters,' as he loved to call them, were well known to him. He was as familiar with the 'Canterbury Tales' as I afterwards found Simeon Tandy to be with the Methodist Hymn-book. Spenser's 'Faërie Queene' was a deep well-

spring of delight to him, while his beloved Shakespeare was thumbed and conned as I had never before seen any other man's, not even those belonging to men who have professed to deeply revere the world's bard. His Milton, too, had been reverently studied, while Dryden, Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, Addison, Pope, and Thompson of the Seasons hob-nobbed together on his book-shelves. Jethro was the only man I had ever met who could conscientiously say that he had read Boswell's Johnson through from first page to last, while Fielding, Smollett, and Goldsmith, authors who would have been anathematised by the Methodists of Woodleigh had they known them, were his familiar friends. As for the 'Wizard of the North,' he literally worshipped him, and it was a rare treat indeed to hear Jethro, as I heard him on more than one occasion, declaim the 'Ancient Mariner,' his own eye glittering the while, and his tongue pouring forth a strange power of speech. I sat with him until late that night thus talking about the great immortal who live again in the hearts and minds of those that love them, and, after promising to lend him my 'Festus,' a book which he had been yearning for years to see, I went back to my lonely habitation in the school-house.

Next day I fell in with Simeon Tandy, and learned from him another side of Jethro's character.

'Us wur lads t'gether,' said Simeon, 'an' there be no finer man than Jethro Hawley in all Woodleigh. Ah do know him baint a Christian man as us Methodists b'lieve in 'em, but Ah sometimes thinks as how th' good Lord ha' got more ways of savin' foak than at the penitent form. Ah do know it be a darin' thing t' say, but when Ah think o' Jethro Ah can't help b'lievin' it.

'There be no man in this village wi' a happier face than Jethro, as yo' well do know, 'xcept it be Thomas Tarling. No matter when yo' see Jethro he be allus th' same, yet there be no man wi' greater trouble on his shoulders. . . . His life ha' bin one long string o' disappointment an' affliction. . . . He wur on'y married a single year when his wife wur struck down wi' paralysis, and hers bin on her back ever sin', nigh on fifty years now.'

'How sad!' I ventured.

'Very, beyond words,' said Simeon, shaking his head.

'I spent an hour with Mr Hawley last night,

and my heart went out towards him, but you make me feel still more kindly towards him.'

'For his trouble's sake?'

I nodded my head.

'What then will be yo'r feelings when Ah tell yo' o' his conduct all through these weary years! . . . Many a man wi' th' burden o' such a sorrow would ha' grown gloomy an' sour, but no man livin' can ever accuse Jethro o' such things. He hasna bin th' man to carry his heart 'pon his sleeve, so as ev'rybody might see th' smart he felt.

'Foak do think as how it be 'cause he doant care, an' that un be callous an' indifferent to th' sufferin's o' his wife. 'Em do say as how he be too fond o' his own comforts to show much feelin' for others, but 'em as says that doant know Jethro Hawley. That fine show o' indifference o' his be all put on, an' at heart he be just like a babby.

'Ah wur wi' un the very next day after his wife wur struck down, an' Ah'll never forget it so long as Ah do live. If ever a man wur cut to pieces wi' trouble, Jethro Hawley wur that man.

'Man alive,' Ah said to him, 'doant tak' on so; th' worl' baint coom to an end yet, an' yo' must just look oop.'

'Ah've got too much to look down 'pon, Simeon,' he said, 'an' Ah'll ha' to go wi' droopin' head like a bullrush, an' wi' bleedin' heart all th' days o' my life now.'

'Ah saw un again a few days afterwards, an' then no one could ha' told from seein' un that Jethro wur a man wi' a broken heart. He wur in his shop servin' his customers when Ah called, an' he wur doin' his work wi' as cheerful a face an' as much attention as ever. Eh! Jeth, Ah thought to mysel', time ull soon heal yo'r smart; but that be ower fifty year agone now, and it baint healed yet. Na, Jethro's sorrow be as fresh to-day as ever it wur. . . . Many a time an' many a time again, Ah've coom 'pon un suddenly o' an' evenin' after th' shop ha' bin closed, an' found un grievin' an' frettin', aye, an' cryin', too, just like a stricken child wi' a recent hurt.'

'An' his wife? Pore Sarah? Oh no, *her* never sees un grieve, an' Ah really b'lieve that Jethro loves her more'n more each day.

'Eh! but it be a fine sight to see un in his sick wife's room. Ah've seen un go oop out o' th' shop burdened wi' trouble, but he just minded me o' th' Master Himsel' once un got his foot i'side th' room. There wur no sign o'

trouble on his face then, an' it wur all sunshine for her sake. . . . Foak do say as how Jethro baint a religious man, an' Ah do confess Ah should like to see un coom of'ener t' chapel, an' get his name 'pon a class-book, . . . but a man baint wantin' in th' grace o' God what can keep oop a bright face under such tryin' circumstances.

'Now, m' precious, what can Ah do for yo'?' he ud ask her, as if there wur no trouble in th' worl' on his mind. 'Shall Ah shake oop yo'r pillows a lil'l an' mak' yo' a bit more comfortable like?' an' then he ud go about it as gentle as a mother. . . . Ah never see Jethro do that wi'out a lump in m' throat; it be so unlike what foak in Woodleigh think o' un. Ah tell yo' what it be, th' man what can show so much o' th' spirit o' Christ under such crushin' sorrow be no worldlin', whether un be a chapel goer or not. Th' good God may ha' designed that yo' an' me should first meet wi' Him at th' penitent form in chapel, but Ah think that Jethro Hawley's Bethel ha' bin his wife's sick-room.'

It was a marvel to me that a man with such a fire in his blood should have been able to bear up so against such manifold and distressing afflictions, to triumph so over the disappoint-

ment of his hopes, and to look with unflinching face upon the wreck of all his youthful ambitions, but I lived long enough in Woodleigh to agree with Simeon Tandy, and to learn that it is sometimes by strange and devious pathways that God leads the human soul to Himself.

Lingerers
Overlong

LINGERERS OVERLONG

I

HIS HEART'S DESIRE

'He sits beside the dying ember,
God for hope and man for friend,
Content to see, glad to remember,
Expectant of the certain end.'

WITH the sunrise, and long before it in winter, Woodleigh folk are astir and at work on the farms, so, therefore, it need not be a matter of surprise that at night they should retire early to rest. Shortly after the bats come out, a hush falls upon the village; the clanking of the dairy-maids' milk-cans, the ringing of the smithy anvil, the cheery call of the ploughman to his team of horses in the field, and all the other sounds so familiar to country life cease, and all the busy workers seek their homes. An hour afterwards it would be little short of a marvel to meet a single soul afoot in the village. Then, one by

one, the dim lights in the windows of the cottages are put out, and Woodleigh sleeps.

The last light to go out in Woodleigh is Jethro Hawley's. When he has put up the shutters of his shop, it is his custom to retire to his little parlour to pass the waning hours of the evening in quiet reading. He, of all folk in the village, keeps the latest hours, and often the clocks are striking the small hours of the next morning before he rakes out the fire and goes to bed. Often he is joined by another, but then there is no reading done, and the evening passes in quiet chat of bygone days. At such times Jethro rarely lights the lamp, for he and his friend have a whim that a chat together in the firelight is homelier and more conducive to reminiscence. That friend is no other than Simeon Tandy. He and Jethro were boys together, and have been fast friends ever since.

'What a long time it seems, Simeon, since you and I were boys together!' said Jethro one night after a prolonged pause in their chat, during which the two old men had sat gazing silently into the glowing fire. 'So long,' answered Simeon after another pause, 'that Ah've a'most lost count o' th' years.'

'And yet sometimes it seems but as yester-

day. . . . I have a vivid recollection to this day of many of our pranks when we two were boys. Do you mind the time when we went bee-hunting together?'

'Ah do well, Jethro, an' Ah sometimes laugh even now at th' figger yo' cut. Do yo' mind? Scheulmaister's bees had swarmed, an' us two chased 'em wi' tin-cans into Parson Woolcott's meadow, an' ower th' brook.'

Jethro was laughing heartily.

'I mind it well, Simeon,' he said, between his fits of merriment. 'The bees 'lighted on the branch overhanging the brook——'

'When yo' made a jump for 'em, an' down yo' went splashin' into th' water. Eh! Jethro, Ah can see yo' now skitin' th' water about like a dog swimmin', an' blowin' like a whale. Man alive, it wur fine, that wur—fine.'

'You had me there, Simeon,' said Jethro, wiping his wet eyes with his handkerchief, 'but I had the laugh out of you not long afterwards.'

'On th' raft in Farmer Thompson's duck pond?'

Jethro fairly exploded with laughter.

'You mind it, do you?'

'Ah've reason to,' said Simeon, 'an' somehow Ah can scarce forgive yo' to this day for't. Yo'

wur a terr'ble wratch, Jethro, when yo' wur a lump o' a lad.'

'Nay, Simeon, it was only fair payment for your laughing at me when I was floundering in the brook, with the bees all buzzing and flying round my head.'

'But yo' lied, Jethro, yo' lied. Yo' got me t' promise to go to Ameriky wi' yo' on th' raft, an' when Ah stepped on it yo' gave it one kick out into th' middle o' th' pond wi' yo'r foot, an' then stood laughin' and screamin' like mad on th' side o' the pond.

'That wur bad enough, but yo' capped it. When yo' saw me polin' th' raft bravely ower to t' other, yo' set oop a shout that th' farmer wur a-coömin'——'

'And you made no more ado, but jumped clean off the raft into the water. I could have died with laughing, Simeon, when I saw you floundering in the muddy pond. You were up to your neck in it, man.'

'Ah wur, an' all because yo' took it into yo'r wicked head to lie.'

'Farmer Thompson were no way near; indeed, un had gone ower to Spaton that morning.'

'It was tit-for-tat, Simeon, tit-for-tat.'

'Th' thing Ah do mind wi' most pleasure aboöve all be th' walin' th' old scheulmaster gave yo', him wi' th' wooden leg, yo' mind? Yo' richly desarved it that day, Jethro.'

'I deserved some punishment, I've no doubt, but hardly the walin' I got. He was a brutal old man, was the schoolmaster, and could never make any allowance for a boy's spirits. He would never have done for these days.'

'No, it wur long afore scheul boards cam' in.'

'All I did that day was to tie his wooden leg fast to the chair while he was sleeping in the schoolroom,' and at the mention of it, Jethro could not refrain from again laughing loudly.

'Yo' set his newspaper afire, too; it wur the blaze that wakkened un, an' the screamin' th' scholards set oop.'

'Eh! what days they were, Simeon, what days they were! Do yo' know, Simeon, though we are both old men now, I sometimes feel as much a lad as ever.'

'That be much to yo'r credit, Jethro. It be no won'er that all th' childer o' the place keep so fond o' yo'. . . . For mysel' Ah feel that Ah'm failin' fast. It baint that Ah've lost m' int'rest in all what be goin' on roun' us, but Ah'm breakin' oop, Ah'm breakin' oop. . . . Ah doant think

that m' heart be ony older than it wur in th' days when us two wur mischeevous lads t'gether, an' Ah pray God that Ah may keep it young right oop to th' last, but Ah do feel it more'n more ev'ry day what I do live that Ah'm a'most worn out.

'An' somehow, Jethro, Ah doant mind it a lil'l bit. Ah've lived m' life, an' a blessed one it ha' bin, though Ah never had much o' this worl's goods, an' Ah'm satisfied. Ah used t' think as how Ah could never face th' prospect o' death, an' o' leavin' this worl', . . . an' all th' dear foak o' Woodleigh behind; but, Jethro, there be more Woodleigh foak . . . gone ower th' border than all what be now livin' wi' us here on this side to-day . . . More o' 'em as us do know, Jethro, an' whom Ah'm longin' "to greet again on that eternal shore."'

Jethro's mirth had all died down, and he was sitting with grave face looking into the smouldering fire.

'Us, Jethro, be all that be left o' th' old scheulmates . . . an' us be drawin' near to th' end o' oor tether. John Oakey be a dozen years younger'n you an' me, an' Thomas Tarling more'n a score. Do yo' know, Jethro——'

'See! Simeon,' exclaimed Jethro, suddenly, 'I

will just show you the front door if you carry on in this fashion much longer. Why, it's enough to give a man the dumps!'

'Well, Ah can't help it th' night, Jethro. Somehow Ah do feel as if Ah'm never to spen' anoöther evenin' wi' yo' in frien'ly chat . . . an' it be borne in 'pon me that there be goin' to be a partin' atween us.'

Jethro's mood changed. He became anxious and alarmed for Simeon.

'You be ill, Simeon, you be ill,' and, when Jethro was off his guard, he often lapsed into his native vernacular. 'You must send for Underhill. Ah doant like to hear a man talk like yo' be doin'; Ah'm allus afraid there be something radically wrong wi' him. How long have you felt like this, Simeon? . . . But there be no time to lose. No doctor in th' worl' can do much good for a patient if un baint called in in time. Ned Thornbury shall ride ower to Bycombe th' first thing in th' morning, and bring Underhill ower. No, you needna demur . . . this be no light matter to me, Simeon . . . if yo' wur gone, Ah doant know as how Ah should greatly care to live.'

Simeon's hand sought Jethro's in the glimmering light, and grasped it in eloquent silence.

'These partin's,' he said huskily, after a deep pause, 'must coom sooner or later . . . one o' us ull probably ha' to go afore t' other; which o' us God on'y knows. Th' chief thing is to be ready when th' call cooms t' say a cheery good-bye. Us baint like younger men, Jethro; if us had bin called away in earlier life th' call might ha' coom unexpected, but us ha' nothin' t' complain o' now . . . a long life ha' bin granted us to get ready for oor departure.'

'Whenever the call comes, Simeon, you needna fear it. You ha' done nobly an' well.'

'When it does, Jethro, it baint what Ah've done that Ah'll trust to, but just God's mercy in Christ. . . . All oor works be as unrighteousness in His sight. . . .'

'No, doant say that. Ah'll never b'lieve it. It be a libel upon th' Almighty's goodness, Simeon. He baint worse than men. If He be God, He must be infinitely better, an' He can appreciate good work as well as sinful men. . . . Ah've never professed to be much of a chapel man, Simeon, as you do know, but there is one bit o' doctrine Ah'll hold to,—th' Almighty never discounts a man's good works, but looks at ev'ry earnest endeavour as through a magnifying glass.'

Simeon shook his head gravely.

'That baint Methodist doctrine,' he said.

'Mebbe not, but it be a human one, an' Ah'm a firm b'liever in't. Ah'm fully persuaded, Simeon, that God makes allowances for men's frailties.'

'If salvation wur o' works, Jethro, yourn ud be certain.'

'Mine! What have *I* done?

Simeon silently pointed upstairs.

'Man alive,' said Jethro, 'pore Sarah be my wife!'

'Yo' ha bin all goodness to her.'

'An' wouldn't any husband ha' bin th' same?'

'Ah dunno. Mebbe. Some might ha' growed tired o' th' trouble o' it.'

'But you forget Sarah is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh!'

'Ah've seen th' moöther hen peck her ailin' chick, an' drive it from her.'

'Hush! not another word, Simeon, not another word. There ha' bin no merit in what Ah've done, an' all ha' bin done wi' th' selfish motive of keepin' my pore Sarah this side of the grave.'

For a little space the two old men sat in silence again, each busy with his own thoughts

Then the fire fell in the grate, and it seemed to recall Simeon to his first purpose.

'Human life, Jethro, be just like that fire . . . it gets lower an' lower, an' at last burns itself clean out——'

Still Jethro did not speak.

'An' yet,' Simeon continued reflectively, 'it baint 'xactly like that fire nither . . . though some lives be, some lives be. There be some what leave nothin' but ashes behind 'em, while others leave that behind what ull kindle fires—fires in other men's breasts.'

'An' that is something to ha' lived for,' said Jethro warmly.

'Yes, but it baint all. It baint sufficient just to leave a legacy o' good works . . . a man must ha' laid oop some treasure aboöve if un wants to die well. Ah do feel th' need o' this more'n more ev'ry day, Jethro, as Ah gets nearer to th' eternal worl'.'

For a few moments there was again a deep silence in the little parlour.

Then Jethro spoke slowly.

'It sometimes comes ower me like a flood, Simeon, that there be no other world than this. No, it baint scepticism that makes me think so; for, though Ah've never bin a member o' society,

Ah know all th' points o' Methodist doctrine upon th' subject of an Hereafter, an' Ah could defend 'em all in argument, aye and would, but a man can't help his doubts. It all seems so improbable——'

He paused abruptly, and Simeon quietly waited for him to proceed.

'Ah'm thinking Ah won't burden you, Simeon, wi' my doubts.'

'Nay, go on, Jethro, go on; give 'em voice. There be nothin' what so soon kills doubts as givin' 'em an airin'. It be when 'em be bottled oop in th' heart that 'em do thrive.'

'Don't you have your doubts at times, Simeon?

'O' th' certainty o' an eternal future? Never, Jethro, never. Ah've a sure an' certain hope o' it.'

'But what if your hope be a false one, Simeon?'

'It be begotten o' God by th' resurrection o' oor Lord an' Saviour, an' it canna be false.'

'Ah wish Ah'd your confidence, Simeon.'

'An' why can't yo'? Be there ony reason why yo' shouldn't?'

'No, Ah suppose not, no good reason, but Ah simply can't. Ah suppose, Simeon, Ah must ha' bin made o' stiffer clay than you. Ah really can't take in anything beyond the bounds of

time and sense. There be times when Ah've no difficulty in believing these things, but Ah fear there is a big strain of the Didymus in my blood.

'You see, Simeon, my lot ha' bin such a strange one, and so different from most men's. Ah've never said much about my thoughts to others, no, not even to you, but to this day Ah cannot understand why my pore Sarah was struck down so low when just in the strength of her days. It has always seemed an awful thing to me that God should ha' allowed it . . . and, to tell you the truth, Simeon, my heart ha' never ceased to rebel against it since.

'No, no, Ah cannot defend my thoughts, and perhaps Ah ought to ha' grown more reconciled years and years ago, but there be the livin' sorrow ever before me, Simeon. You say, God be beneficently kind and good—why, then, does He permit human sufferin'?

'Nay, don't misunderstand me, Ah'm not charging th' Almighty with cruelty. Ah'm on'y floundering, Simeon, as Ah've been floundering for years. . . . . It baint that Ah would doubt th' goodness of th' Eternal, but it be so hard to reconcile that twisted body of my lass upstairs with infinite goodness and compassion. Be it any wonder that Ah sometimes doubt?'

Simeon had too big a heart to try to belittle Jethro's feelings, by shallow explanations of the great doubt which has filled so many minds in all ages, but he tried what he could to speak a word of cheer.

'Just think of a' th' frien's ower there, Simeon!'

'Ah do try, often and often, and, and when Ah hear that hymn sung, Ah try to join in th' singing o' it, but somehow it always sticks in my throat. If there be another world, what do us know of it? Nothing, nothing. The Scriptures tell us of some who were called back from th' grave, but they never gave any sign of what was on the other side, and we do not know.'

Simeon placed his hand on Jethro's arm.

'Ah'm heart-brokken for yo', Jethro,' he said in a voice quavering with deep sympathy. 'Yo'r faith ha' bin chilled by yo'r hard lot, but Ah'm feared yo' be lettin' yo'r feelin's swamp yo'r judgment.

'Believe me, Jethro, there be anoöther worl' than this, a happier an' a better one, an' yo' an' me ull soon enter it. . . . . 'Em do say as how there be no sorrow in heaven, Jethro, but Ah'm sure my joy ud be mixed if Ah hadna yo'r companionship there, just as Ah've had it here for well nigh on seventy years now.'

Jethro sat silent. Simeon's words were like balm to his troubled heart, but yet his mood was not all sped.

'Could yo' bear to think, Jethro, that all oor frien's be gone from us for ever? . . . . an' that when us lays oor bodies down that ull be th' end o' us? Ah couldna b'lieve that if Ah tried, Jethro; it ud be a terr'ble blow to me if Ah could . . . for Ah've lived a lonely life all these years, Jethro, and—'

Simeon faltered painfully. There was something in his throat that almost choked his utterance.

'Do yo' know why, Jethro?'

Jethro shook his head silently.

'It wur 'cause Ah'd a hope o' one day meetin' some one again on t'other side o' the grave,' and with the confession Simeon broke down utterly. In an instant Jethro was himself again, and full of sympathy. He flung aside all his doubts and gloomy forebodings, and drew his chair nearer to Simeon's.

'Who, Simeon?' he asked with kindly interest.

'Ah've never told a single soul about it afore, not even yo', Jethro, not even yo'. It ha' allus seemed too sacred for onyone but mysel'.'

'Then what need to tell it now, Simeon?'

'No, Ah can't keep it ony longer, an' there be no one Ah could tell it to but yo', Jethro.'

Simeon paused a moment and mopped his brow with his handkerchief. The red glow of the fire filled the room, and fell upon the two men's faces.

'Yo'rs ha' bin a hard lot, Jethro, but it hasna bin wi'out some lil'l compensation. . . . Yo've had yo'r love wi' yo' all through life, e'en though her ha' been bedridden, pore thing.'

'Yes, and that be a great deal to be thankful for. It ha' bin' a big trial, but it would ha' bin a bigger one had she bin taken away from me altogether.'

'Ah doant know, Ah doant know. None o' us could wish oor loved ones to live just to suffer . . . but Ah sometimes think as how Ah might ha' bin a better man if my love had bin spared to me.'

'Yours, Simeon?' asked Jethro, in surprise.

'Yes, mine. . . . Foak in Woodleigh do think as how Ah've never known love for woman, an' that Ah've allus bin a niggardly cratur——'

'No, no, Simeon.'

'Of'en an' of'en 'em ha' twitted me wi' it, an' ha' thought me less than human 'cause Ah

didna bring a woman home to m' cottage. But 'em doant know all.

'Ah loved once, Jethro, an' once for all.'

Jethro did not speak. He could not. It was too sacred a moment for light interruption, and Simeon was talking out of his heart, out of his innermost heart, and telling the secret of his life.

'Yes, yo' knowed her, Jethro, an' knowed her well. . . . Her was th' joy o' her father's house, an' sweet an' pure as one o' God's angels. . . . Her ha' indeed bin an angel for nigh on fifty year now. . . . P'raps her wur one while her wur here awhile, just strayed away a lil'l from her native plaäce, an' mebbe that be why God called her home so early.'

Jethro was strongly moved, and growing strangely excited.

'Us never told ony one o' oor love, though us used t' think as how yo', Jethro, suspected it. But yo' gave no sign. . . . Her wur allus ailin', yo' see, pore child, allus ailin', so us never 'xpected to be able to wed . . . but when her wur dyin', Ah wur permitted to spen' an hour in prayer wi' her. Yo' mind yo' had gone ower to Monksford that day for flour? Yo' may ha' forgotten, but Ah can never forget

all th' circumstances o' that day. . . 'Em be burned into my mem'ry.'

'Simeon!' gasped Jethro, but could say no more.

'It wur th' day afore her died, an' when Ah wur takkin' leave o' her, she slipped her lil'l frail hand into mine, an' whispered a word which ha' bin my joy an' strength ever sin'. "Husband," her said, "Ah'll wait for yo' in heaven," an' Ah know, Jethro, her ull be th' first to meet me at th' Golden Gates.'

'Yes, her name wur Katherine Hawley—

'My sister!'

'An' my one an' on'y love. Yes, Jethro, it be her Ah'm hopin' t' meet t'other side o' th' grave, an' it ha' bin for her sweet sake Ah've lived a lonely life all these years.

'But Ah've not bin so lonely as foaks ud think. Ah've never laid me down t' sleep one day sin' her wur takken from us wi'out holdin' secret intercourse wi' her, an' Ah've felt her near me all these years.

'Yo' sometimes doubt o' anoöther worl', an' o' man's immortality, but Ah can't, Jethro, Ah can't . . . an' o' all th' minist'rin' spirits sent out to minister to yo' an' me durin' oor long pilgrimage

o' life, Ah know an' feel that dear Katherine ha' bin th' chief.'

For a long space the two men sat in perfect silence, Jethro both amazed and humbled by what he had just heard. Then the fire fell again in the grate, and Simeon rose to take his leave. Without a word, Jethro accompanied him to the door, and there the two old men stood a few moments longer in silence, with the glittering stars looking down upon them, and the deepening silences of night round them.

'Simeon,' said Jethro at length, while they held each other's hand in a lingering farewell, 'whether men be right or wrong in hoping for a future, my reason cannot say, but yo' ha' this night strengthened my faith, an' if there be another world, please God Ah'll meet you an' Katherine there.'

'That be all m' heart's desire, Jethro. Good-night. . . . Good-night.'

II

'NOW LETTEST THOU THY SERVANT DEPART IN PEACE——'

WOODLEIGH Methodists timed the commencement of their Sabbath services by the Cleeve Church bell, and, generally speaking, the preacher appointed mounted the pulpit stairs with the tuneful booming of its dying notes still lingering on the air. On this morning, however, the last echoes of the bell had passed into the silences and still the Woodleigh congregation sat expectant of the entrance of the preacher. Five minutes — ten minutes passed, but yet no preacher appeared. The people in the pews began to grow fidgetty and anxious, whilst sundry nods and raised brows, as if in mute questioning, plainly told the congregation's deep concern. In the vestry, the stewards were waiting in perplexity, and Jesse Stallard had gone several times to the door and glanced down the long road to see if there were any signs of the preacher's appearing, but had been compelled

each time to return with a despondent shaking of the head, his mouth pursed with the monosyllable, 'No.'

'Ah can't un'erstan' it,' he said at length, 'Ah've never knowed Simeon to miss afore.'

'Ah'm feared,' said John Oakey, 'Simeon must ha' bin takken porely suddenly.'

'Ah'm feared,' echoed Jesse.

'What shall us do?'

'There be nothin' for't this morning but a prayer-mittin'. But Ah think yo'd better go 'long, John, an' see if onything be wrong wi' un. Tak' Thomas Tarling wi' yo'.'

In Woodleigh people rarely knock at each other's doors when visiting. The general practice is to raise the hasp, push the door gently open, and then to call in before formally entering. This is what Thomas Tarling did now, as he and John Oakey came up to Simeon's cottage door.

'Simeon, be yo' at home?' he called, as he waited a moment on the threshold, while he held the door slightly ajar.

There was no answer. Thomas Tarling repeated his call, this time raising the pitch of his voice. But still no one answered from within.

Marvelling greatly, he turned and faced John Oakey.

'Him baint at home,' ventured the farmer.

But Thomas Tarling's face was awed and set.

'Ah can't think that, John, an' somehow Ah've a strange presentiment.'

'O' what?'

'Ah dunno. Shall us go for'ard an' see?'

'Aye, sure*ly*,' said John Oakey, catching something of Thomas Tarling's awe, 'go on in, Thomas, an Ah'll follow yo',' and, after once again calling Simeon's name, Thomas softly led the way in.

The cottage was a thatched one, with a little front room that looked out on the road, and that did service for both parlour and living room, with a small place at the back of it which might, with an accommodating imagination, have been called a scullery. Upstairs, there was but one bedroom, the window of which was half-hidden by the projecting thatch, 'neath which some singing birds had built their nests.

The callers first entered the living room, but Simeon was not there, nor were any signs visible of his having that morning been there. The room was cold and cheerless. No fire was in

the grate, and the dishes used at the last night's supper were still upon the table.

Thomas Tarling and John Oakey were both amazed at the barrenness that met their sight. The cheerlessness of the place seemed to strike a chill to their hearts. They stood a while staring at each other in deepening awe.

'Call oopstairs, Thomas,' whispered John Oakey presently, and together, and on tip-toes, they approached the foot of the narrow and primitive-looking staircase, a staircase more like a ladder than anything else. 'Simeon, be yo' at home?'

Still no voice answered them, but, a moment afterwards, they were sure they heard someone talking upstairs, and, without further hesitation, they stole quietly up. Six little, narrow stairs were all that led to the bedroom door, and there they paused again suddenly. Within someone in very deed was talking.

'Now, Lord, lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word . . . . My eyes ha' seen, an' my ears ha' heard Thy salvation.

'Ah've journeyed long, Lord, an' mebbe tarried owermuch on th' road, . . . but Ah've passed th' last mile-stone now, an' Ah can a'most see th' end o' th' journey.

'Ah thank Thee, Heavenly Father, for th' long life Thou has granted me, Thy unworthy servant, . . . an' Ah've bin glad o' it, so as how Ah might do a long day's work for Thee, . . . but Ah'm ower tired now, Lord Jesus, an' Ah'm thankful that th' summons ha' coom at last.

'Lord, be wi' me to th' end. . . . Thou, who ha' bin wi' me all through life, forsake me not as Ah near th' end. . . Be wi' me in th' valley, an' grant, Lord, that m' faculties . . . may be clear oop to th' last, . . . right oop to th' last, Lord.'

The faces of the two men on the stairs had turned a ghastly white while they had stood listening in awe, and each was striving, but with only poor success, to choke down his strong emotion. Thomas Tarling was at the head of the stairs, and John Oakey but two steps below him. In the pause that followed Simeon's prayer, the former motioned to Thomas Tarling, and Thomas knocked gently at the bedroom door.

'Simeon!' he called huskily.

'Be that yo', Thomas Tarling?' came his broken voice in reply.

'Me an' John Oakey,' Thomas Tarling answered as he gently pushed open the door.

'Coom in an' welcome,' said Simeon, turning

towards them, and, with the fear of little children at their hearts, the two men stole softly into the room.

'Yo' missed me at chapel? . . . Ah hadna forgot m' appointment, but . . . a Stranger cam' in th' dead o' th' night, an' said, "Simeon! yo'r day's work be ower." . . . Ah could ha' wished to ha' bin permitted to praich once more in th' old sanctooary, with all th' dear faces roun' me, but Ah'm called to lay down m' tools, an' cease at once to work an' live.

'Na, na, m' old frien's, yo' mustna grieve. There be no call for't. . . . This day be what Ah've bin livin' for an' lookin' for'ard to a'most all m' life, ever sin' Jesus washed m' sins away. . . . Bless yo', it be no grief to me to lie here; it be glory, glory, glory.

'Eh! th' visions Ah've had in th' night-season! It be a won'er to me that this pore old earthen vessel didna break, so full ha' it been wi' th' glory o' em.'

'Simeon,' said John Oakey, when at length he could find words, and taking his old friend's hand in his, 'Ah'm not a-goin' to say onything that ud damp yo'r joy, but us can't help being moved at seeing yo' lyin' here so porely. . . . Be yo' in ony pain o' body?'

'No, not 'xactly. . . . God ha' spared me from this, but Ah'm as weak as a babby.'

'Yo' must ha' bin ailin' some time?' asked Thomas Tarling.

'Ah've bin failin' for months back, but . . . Ah've not given in till now.'

'Yo' oughter ha' sent for Dr Underhill.'

Simeon shook his head.

'What use would it ha' bin? Ah'm past curin'. . . . Ah'm just coom to th' end o' my days, an' what doctor can lengthen 'em?

'Na, na, frien's, one lifetime be enough, an' when one cooms to lie here, un be thankful that it be th' end coom at last, an' there be no wish to stay.

'Ah'm glad yo' ha' come at ony rate. . . . That wur th' on'y thing what troubled me. . . . Ah wur a lil'l bit feared that Ah might go wi'out sayin' good-bye to yo' all . . . but God ha' granted me e'en this last token o' His goodness.'

Yo'd like us to fetch th' frien's?'

'Yes, all o' 'em, all o' 'em, as many as what can coom, . . . 'specially my old companion Jethro . . . an' Lucy Stallard.'

'Shall us sen' for Maister Eachus or th' Sooper?'

'Na. . . . Ah'd very much like to see 'em,

but there be no time. Ah feel m' weakness creepin' ower me, an' Ah doant think Ah can last . . . much aboöve anoöther hour longer.'

The two old friends at the bedside could plainly see it. Though Simeon talked clearly, it was only between long pauses that his panting breath permitted him to express himself. There was, therefore, no time to lose, and Thomas Tarling, being the younger man of the two, left John Oakey sitting on the edge of Simeon's bed while he ran, first to Jethro Hawley, then to Lucy Stallard, and afterwards to the Thornburys, to break the sad news.

Of all, Jethro Hawley heard the message with the least surprise. Since that last night's solemn chat with Simeon, he had been almost expecting it. The twitching of his pale face showed how deeply he was moved, but he uttered no word of amazement. All he said as he quickly passed through the kitchen on his way out was to the woman who had acted for years as his housekeeper.

'' 'Riah, don't let Mrs Hawley know what has come to Simeon. If she asks where I am, just say I have gone out a while, and that I will be back as soon as possible.'

Simeon's cottage lay only a few minutes' walk

away from Jethro's shop, so that it was not long before the two men were grasping each other's hand in silence.

'It be coom at last, Jethro,' Simeon said after a protracted pause.

Jethro was too full yet to speak, but he pressed his old friend's hand.

'Ah told yo' t'other night as how Ah 'xpected it. . . . Yo'll soon be th' last o' oor generation left, Jethro . . . but yo'll not be long left behind.'

'Na,' said Jethro with guttural utterance, and falling naturally back into his vernacular, 'Ah'm th' next on th' list, an', if it wur not for pore Sarah's sake, Simeon, Ah wouldna care how soon m' name wur called.'

'Ah'll see all th' old scheulmates again soon, Jethro. . . . Be there ony message what yo'd like to sen' ony o' 'em?'

Jethro was broken to pieces with his grief, and could scarcely speak, but he bent down and spoke in Simeon's ear.

'Tell 'em, Simeon, that Ah no longer doubt an immortality . . . an' that Ah mean . . . to spen' it in glory wi' 'em.'

Jethro's broken words caused Simeon to look up into his friend's face with a heavenly joy upon his own.

'My cup be now full, Jethro, an m' heart's desire gratified. . . . Now, Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace . . . accordin' to Thy word ——'

He ceased abruptly, and afterwards seemed to sink rapidly. For a long while he lay in an apparently unconscious state. In the house all was perfectly still, and no sound disturbed the silence save the laboured breathing of the dying man. Then downstairs, the opening of a door was heard, and the next moment the creaking stairs announced the arrival of another visitor. It was Janet Thornbury, come with her motherly heart full of anxious solicitude.

Simeon seemed to know she had come. As she crept gently to his bedside, he opened his eyes and received her with a rich smile. Just then he was too weak to do more, for his late effort had exhausted him, and his long sleep had done nothing to recuperate his failing powers. He could not speak, and, indeed, it was only for his old friend Jethro that he now seemed to reserve his strength. Janet instinctively understood, and was satisfied abundantly with the look he gave her. She just lingered a moment to drop a tear on his withered face, and then set about quietly ministering to his comfort.

When next he spoke his voice was low, and Jethro had to put his ear down almost to his mouth to catch what was said.

'Ah felt Ah couldna die, Jethro, till Ah'd yo' near me . . . yo'll stay an' see th' end o' yo'r old comrade?'

'Ah'll never leave yo', Simeon, till Ah'm forced. Nothing ha' ever coom atween us in life, an' nothing but Death ull part us now.'

'An' that not for long, Jeth.'

'No, not for long. On'y for a lil'l while, Simeon,' answered Jethro cheerily. It was surprising how the great change working in Simeon had wrought another in Jethro. As he stood by Simeon's bedside, he was no longer Didymus, but a man full of strength and hope.

'Ah've one wish before Ah go, Jethro. . . . M' class tickets. . . .'

'Yes?'

'Put 'em all into m' coffin wi' me. . . . Ah've kept 'em all from th' first, ev'ry one o' 'em for ower sixty years back. . . . Dr Beaumonts gave me m' first ticket when he wur praichin' ower to Bycombe, an' Ah've been ten times. . . . through the alphabet sin' then. . . . Yo'll find 'em all in th' top drawer downstairs. . . . 'Em be tied oop in ten lil'l bundles.

'There ull be a lil'l money ower from th' buryin'. . . . Besides that Ah've got nothin' else in th' worl', but Ah owes no man onything. . . . Give what be ower from th' buryin' to th' poor fund o' th' chapel.

'Th' bits o' furniture Ah've no wish about 'xcept th' chest o' drawers; give 'em to Janet . . . her ull keep 'em for my sake . . . Jethro!' and the voice had now sunk to the faintest, painfullest whisper, ''em wur th' on'y bit o' furniture Ah ever bought for m' weddin' wi' Katie.

'Ah think that be all,' he said once again, after a prolonged pause, and repeated the words several times softly over to himself. Then he fell into a deep, stuporous sleep, from which he did not waken for hours. Even then it was only a partial awakening, and his mind wandered sadly. At one time he must have fancied himself in the Quarterly Meeting again.

'Ah move, Mr Sooper,' he said with emphasis, 'that us move th' worl'. . . . Th' disciples turned it oopside down, an' us can do it, too, if us on'y gets baptised wi' th' Spirit o' Power. . . . Ah want to see a mighty revival o' God's work in oor circuit. . . .'

At another time he seemed to think himself conducting an evangelistic service.

''Em be comin',' he cried, 'pore sinners be comin'. . . . Eh! frien's, what a blow old Satan be gettin' th' night! . . . Th' crown be on th' head o' Jesus! . . . An' He shall reign in all oor hearts! . . . Sing it, frien's, sing it,' and his lips moved as if he were joining in the singing of a hymn, while his wasted face was lit up with inexpressible joy. Those weeping round thought he was singing 'All hail the power of Jesu's name,' and in a low, murmurous tone, actually joined him.

Several times he seemed to be far back again in the days of his boyhood.

'Jeth, lad,' he exclaimed once with surprising utterance, shortly before he passed away, 'yon be th' scheul bell a-ringing'. . . . Us ull be laäte . . . Coom on, an' let us run for't. . . . Ah can't 'bide bein' laäte, an' havin' all th' scheul a-starin' at us.

'Hark! 'em be singin'. . . . That be a new song, Jethro. . . . Ah've never heard 'em sing it afore. . . . Ah won'er shall us be able to sing it wi' 'em! . . . Us be so laäte . . . *so laäte!*'

'Yo'll sing it wi' th' best o' 'em soon, Simeon,' said Jethro huskily. 'An Ah won't be long in followin' to learn th' song wi' yo'.

Lucy Stallard had stolen in some half-hour

before to see her old friend Simeon die, and Mrs Tarling had accompanied her. The women in the room were all sobbing audibly, and the men struggling their might to control their surging feelings.

'Ah've larnt m' lesson, Jeth, an Ah've no fear. . . . Th' Lord be my Shepherd, Ah shall not want. . . . Yea, though Ah walk through th' valley o' th' shadow o' Death . . . th' valley . . . th' valley, . . . through th' valley, th' valley o' . . .

'Of the shadow of death,' prompted Janet Thornbury, her voice choking with emotion.

'Th' valley . . . th' valley . . . th' valley,' he kept on repeating, as if he could not possibly recall the following words.

Jethro bent down and put his mouth to his ear.

'Simeon,' he said, 'th' valley be on'y a shadow o' death . . . It baint real, Simeon . . . Look beyond th' shadow! . . .'

For a while he lay perfectly still again, his eyes vacant and staring. Then suddenly a bright light from an unseen glory fell upon his face, and he half uprose in bed.

'Em be all there!' and he pointed upwards with his finger. 'Yon's father an' mother . . . an'

all th' dear Woodleigh foak. . . . God ha' bin true to His promise an' ha' landed 'em all safe home . . . an' yon's Katie! . . . Lass, Ah'm coömin'. . . . Ah've lingered overlong on th' road, an' it ha' bin a weary journey, but Ah'm coom at last. . . . An' yon be . . . ?'

He paused a moment, and a voice from the Unseen must have answered him.

'*Jesus*,' he repeated with ineffable satisfaction, and, a moment after, with great fervency, 'M' Saviour an' m' God.'

Then he fell heavily back upon his pillow again, and was not, for God took him.

Long afterwards, Jethro Hawley still sat on the edge of the bed, holding his dead friend's hand, and murmuring pitifully:

'Ah'm all that be left now. . . . Ah'm th' last o' my day an' generation . . . a laggard traveller left to journey alone just a lil'l while longer.'

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Methodist idylls.

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